



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



TUESDAY — 22 MAR 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	03/21 US sanctions Sudan police: excess force
SOURCE	https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/21/update-3-u-s-places-sanctions-on-sudans-central-reserve-police-over-protest-crackdown

GIST

The United States has imposed sanctions on Sudan's Central Reserve Police, accusing it of using [excessive force](#) against peaceful protesters demonstrating against last October's military coup.

The US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Monday the Central Reserve Police, a heavily armed division of Sudan's police force, has been at the forefront of the "violent response" of Sudanese security forces to peaceful protests in Khartoum.

Pointing to a single day in January, it accused the group of firing live ammunition and, along with anti-riot police and regular police, chasing protesters trying to flee, arresting and beating some, and fatally shooting two and injuring others.

"Since the October 25 military takeover, Sudan's Central Reserve Police has used excessive force and violence intended to silence civilian activists and protesters," the Treasury's under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, Brian Nelson, said in the [statement](#).

"We condemn Sudan's security services for killing, harassing, and intimidating Sudanese citizens."

[Regular protests](#) calling for civilian rule have taken place since a military coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan on October 25, with heavy-handed crackdowns leaving 87 dead, according to medics, the AFP news agency reported.

The October coup derailed a fragile [power-sharing agreement](#) between the army and civilians that had been painstakingly negotiated after the 2019 overthrow of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir.

A police spokesman could not be reached for comment. Military leaders have said peaceful protests are allowed and that protest-related casualties will be investigated.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a [separate statement](#) called for an immediate [end to violence](#) against peaceful protesters.

"We remain poised to use all tools at our disposal to support the Sudanese people in their pursuit of a democratic, human rights-respecting, and prosperous Sudan," Blinken said.

Monday's so-called "Global Magnitsky sanctions", which target those accused of corruption, human rights abuses and anti-democratic actions around the world, freeze any US assets of the Central Reserve Police and bar Americans from dealing with them.

Western countries and international financing institutions [suspended](#) billions of dollars in foreign aid after the coup and military commanders have yet to appoint a prime minister to tackle the economic crisis.

The Central Reserve Police, was used during the early 2000s Darfur war, during which the Khartoum government put down a rebellion in the western region. An estimated 300,000 people were killed in the war, and then-President Omar al-Bashir and aides face war crimes charges from the International Criminal Court.

The force, known locally as "Abu Tayra", referring to the bird that forms a part of their recognisable logo, have been deployed frequently, along with other security forces, in recent months following the coup.

Members of the forces could be seen among a heavy deployment in central Khartoum during protests on Monday, Reuters reported. Protesters faced tear gas, stun grenades, and red water sprays as they attempted to march towards the presidential palace.

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HEADLINE 03/22 EU: rapid response force security plan

SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/03/22/belgium-European-Union-approves-bolstered-security-policy/2751647935197/
GIST	<p>March 22 (UPI) -- As Russia wages war in Europe, lawmakers of the European Union approved an ambitious plan to bolster the bloc's security and defense policy that includes establishing a rapid troop deployment capability.</p> <p>The 27-member bloc's defense and foreign affairs ministers approved the so-called Strategic Compass during a joint session on Monday to establish a force of up to 5,000 troops that can be rapidly deployed to combat various military crises nations in the union may face.</p> <p>The security plan, which sets out goals to be achieved over the next five to 10 years, also ensures 200 fully equipped Common Defense and Security Policy mission experts can be deployed into "complex environments" within 30 days, that regular live exercises on land and sea are conducted and that military mobility is enhanced.</p> <p>It also instructs the EU to boost intelligence analysis capacities, develop teams to detect and respond to hybrid threats, create a foreign information manipulation and interference toolbox, strengthen its maritime military, increase defense spending and reinforce relationships with NATO, the United Nations and regional partners.</p> <p>"I don't want to abuse the word 'historic' that we use a lot in Brussels, but it is certainly a turning point for the European Union as a security provider and much important step for the European Common Security and Defense Policy," Josep Borrell, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security, said during a press conference after the policy was adopted.</p> <p>"I think that the adoption of this document sends a strong signal of unity and resolve, and it comes at a very, very, very important moment because we certainly need to increase our capacities on security and defense."</p> <p>The policy was approved following two years of work but comes at a time of heightened worries of military conflict in Europe as Russia continues its attack on Ukraine.</p> <p>Borrell said that the new policy will not be an answer to the Ukraine war, but that conflict has shown that Europe is in danger.</p> <p>"We started working two years ago but it is very timely, very timely that we approved this Strategic Compass in a moment in which every citizen in Europe can understand the purpose of the document who wants to increase the strength of the European Union as a security provider," he said.</p> <p>Edgars Rinkevics, Latvia's minister of foreign affairs, said the policy will arm the EU with the tools to become "a real geopolitical defense and security player" with NATO.</p> <p>"It's only the beginning of the journey," he tweeted. "Much will depend on how successfully we support Ukraine against Russia's aggression."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Russia court finds Kremlin critic guilty
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/jailed-kremlin-critic-navalny-hear-verdict-new-case-2022-03-21/
GIST	<p>March 22 (Reuters) - A Russian court found jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny guilty of large-scale fraud on Tuesday, a move likely to see the time that President Vladimir Putin's most prominent critic spends in jail extended by years.</p> <p>Navalny is already serving a two-and-a-half sentence at a prison camp east of Moscow for parole violations related to charges he says were fabricated to thwart his political ambitions.</p>

In the latest criminal case against him, which he has also dismissed as politically-motivated, he could have up to 13 years added to that sentence.

A gaunt Navalny stood besides his lawyers in a room filled with prison security officers as the judge read out the accusations against him. The 45-year-old seemed unfazed, looking down as he flipped through court documents.

Prosecutors had asked the court to send him to a maximum-security penal colony for 13 years on charges of fraud and contempt of court. A ruling is expected later on Tuesday.

Navalny was jailed last year when he returned to Russia after receiving medical treatment in Germany following a poison attack with a Soviet-era nerve agent during a visit to Siberia in 2020. Navalny blamed Putin for the attack.

The Kremlin said it had seen no evidence that Navalny was poisoned and denied any Russian role if he was.

After the last court hearing into his case on March 15, Navalny struck a typically defiant tone, writing via Instagram: "If the prison term is the price of my human right to say things that need to be said ... then they can ask for 113 years. I will not renounce my words or deeds."

Russian authorities have cast Navalny and his supporters as subversives determined to destabilise Russia with backing from the West. Many of Navalny's allies have fled Russia rather than face restrictions or jail at home.

Navalny's opposition movement has been labelled "extremist" and shut down, although his supporters continue to express their political stance, including their opposition to Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine, on social media.

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HEADLINE	03/22 Ukraine retakes key Kyiv suburb
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-europe-58eb1948eae037b72218abca32131498
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine said it retook a strategically important suburb of Kyiv early Tuesday, as Russian forces squeezed other areas near the capital and their attack on the embattled southern port of Mariupol raged unabated.</p> <p>Explosions and bursts of gunfire shook Kyiv, and black smoke rose from a spot in the north. Intensified artillery fire could be heard from the northwest, where Russia has sought to encircle and capture several suburban areas of the capital, a crucial target.</p> <p>Residents sheltered at home or underground under a 35-hour curfew imposed by city authorities that runs to Wednesday morning.</p> <p>Russian forces also pressed their siege of Mariupol after the southern port city's defenders refused demands to surrender, with fleeing civilians describing relentless bombardments and corpses lying in the streets. But the Kremlin's ground offensive in other parts of the country advanced slowly or not at all, knocked back by lethal hit-and-run attacks by the Ukrainians.</p> <p>Early Tuesday, Ukrainian troops forced Russian forces out of the Kyiv suburb of Makariv after a fierce battle, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said. The regained territory allowed Ukrainian forces to retake control of a key highway and block Russian troops from surrounding Kyiv from the northwest.</p> <p>Still, the Defense Ministry said Russian forces were able to partially take other northwest suburbs, Bucha, Hostomel and Irpin, some of which had been under attack almost since Russia's military invaded almost a month ago.</p>

Russia's invasion has driven more than 10 million people from their homes, a number similar to the population of Portugal and almost a quarter of Ukraine's pre-war population, according to the United Nations. The U.N. has confirmed over 900 civilian deaths while saying the real toll is probably much higher. Estimates of Russian military deaths vary, but even conservative figures are in the low thousands.

Beyond the terrible human toll, the war has shaken the post-Cold War global security consensus and repeatedly raised worries it could set off a nuclear accident. Ukraine's natural resources minister said wildfires near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine have been extinguished and radiation levels in the area are within norms. Fires are not uncommon in the area, but raise concern about the potential release of radiation from fallout from the 1986 explosion and fire at the plant.

Concerns have been expressed for safety at the decommissioned plant since it was seized by Russian forces last month. The power supply was temporarily cut amid fighting earlier this month, and Ukraine's nuclear regulatory agency said Monday that radiation monitors around the plant had stopped working.

Facing unexpectedly stiff resistance, Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces are increasingly concentrating their air power and artillery on Ukraine's cities and the civilians living there.

U.S. and British officials say Kyiv remains Russia's primary objective. The bulk of Moscow's forces remain miles from the center, but missiles and artillery have destroyed apartment buildings and a large shopping mall, which was left a smoking ruin after being hit late Sunday by strikes that killed eight people, according to emergency officials.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the military's assessment, said Russia had increased air sorties over the past two days, carrying out as many as 300 over a 24-hour period, and has fired more than 1,100 missiles into Ukraine since the invasion began.

U.S. President Joe Biden, who is heading to Europe later in the week to meet with allies, suggested Monday evening that worse may be still to come.

"Putin's back is against the wall," Biden said. "He wasn't anticipating the extent or the strength of our unity. And the more his back is against the wall, the greater the severity of the tactics he may employ."

Biden reiterated accusations that Putin is considering resorting to using chemical or biological weapons, though Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday that the United States has seen no evidence to suggest that use of such weapons was "imminent."

As Russian forces try to squeeze Kyiv, talks to end the fighting have continued by video but failed to bridge the chasm between the two sides. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told Ukrainian television late Monday that he would be prepared to consider waiving any bid by Ukraine to join NATO — a key Russian demand — in exchange for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and a guarantee of Ukraine's security.

Zelenskyy also suggested Kyiv would be open to future discussions on the status of Crimea, which Russia seized in 2014, and areas of the eastern Donbas region held by Russian-backed separatists. But he said that was a topic for another time.

As part of a series of addresses to foreign legislatures to drum up support for Ukraine, Zelenskyy spoke to Italian lawmakers on Tuesday, telling them that the besieged port of Mariupol had been utterly destroyed in the Russian onslaught. He also spoke to Pope Francis.

"Imagine a Genoa completely burned down," he said to rapt lawmakers, citing an Italian port city of a similar size. Mariupol officials said on March 15 that at least 2,300 people had died in the siege, and they have not given an update since. Zelenskyy said 117 children had been killed in the war so far.

Some people managed to flee Mariupol, where weeks of Russian bombardment has cut off electricity, water and food supplies and severed communication with the outside world. The city council said Tuesday that more than 1,100 people who had escaped the besieged city were on their way in a convoy of buses to another city to Mariupol's northwest.

But the Red Cross said a humanitarian aid convoy trying to reach the embattled city with desperately needed supplies still had not been able to enter.

Perched on the Sea of Azov, Mariupol is a crucial port for Ukraine and lies along a stretch of territory between Russia and Crimea. As such, it is a key target that has been besieged for more than three weeks and has seen some of the worst suffering of the war.

It is not clear how close its capture might be. Ukraine's Defense Ministry said Tuesday that their forces were still defending the city and had destroyed a Russian patrol boat and electronic warfare complex. Britain's Defense Ministry said its intelligence showed that "Ukrainian forces continue to repulse Russian attempts to occupy" the city.

Those who have made it out of Mariupol told of a devastated city.

"There are no buildings there anymore," said 77-year-old Maria Fiodorova, who crossed the border to Poland on Monday after five days of travel.

A long line of vehicles stood on a road in Bezimenne, east of Mariupol, as residents sought shelter at a temporary camp set up by Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk region.

A woman who gave her name as Yulia said she and her family sought shelter in Bezimenne after a bombing destroyed six houses behind her home.

"That's why we got in the car, at our own risk, and left in 15 minutes because everything is destroyed there, dead bodies are lying around," she said.

In all, more than 8,000 people escaped to safer areas Monday through humanitarian corridors, including about 3,000 from Mariupol, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said.

Overall, more than 3.5 million people have fled Ukraine, while another 6.5 million have been displaced inside the country.

Matthew Saltmarsh, a spokesperson for the U.N. refugee agency, called the speed and scale of people fleeing danger in Ukraine "unprecedented in recent memory."

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HEADLINE	03/21 US downplays killings of Russia generals
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2022-03-21/pentagon-downplays-reports-of-russian-generals-battlefield-killings
GIST	<p>The Defense Department on Monday downplayed the significance of reports that as many as a half-dozen Russian generals have died in combat in Ukraine, despite claims from Kyiv of "striking" attrition among Russia's front-line commanders.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials have for weeks touted reports and images on social media that supposedly show Russian general officers among the battlefield casualties, including one widely shared instance in which a general's corpse appeared to be left behind in the mud as his own troops relocated.</p> <p>Mykhailo Podoliak, a senior advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on Sunday tweeted the names of six generals he says were killed, adding that these deaths show the Russian army "is fully unprepared & fights only with numbers & cruise missiles."</p>

Though the Pentagon cannot independently verify the claims, a senior defense official told reporters on Monday, “Even if you assume it’s true, I’m not sure that tells you anything in particular about Russian command and control.”

“It makes sense they would have senior leaders or even general officers in the field for an invasion of this size and scale, for them anyway,” the official said. “They haven’t done anything on this size and scale really ever.”

The official added that the composition of Russia’s army differs sharply from its Western counterparts, particularly American armed forces that delegate consequential decision-making authority to junior officers and rely heavily on the seasoned operational experience of senior enlisted non-commissioned officers.

“They don’t organize their military the way we do,” the official said, suggesting that Russia’s doctrine places its generals in hazardous situations more readily than for their American counterparts.

“We do believe that they are having command and control problems, just in terms of communications,” the official added. “They just weren’t prepared for operations of this intensity for this long on so many different multiple lines of attack.”

Only one American general died in combat during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Maj. Gen. Harold Greene was killed in 2014 by an Afghan National Army member who opened fire on dignitaries visiting a headquarters in Afghanistan during an inspection tour. His killing by foreign combatants marked the first among general officers since the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon, and it was the first on foreign territory since the Vietnam War.

The details about the supposedly slain Russia’s generals aligns with a broader narrative Western officials have stressed in recent weeks that its military [is unmotivated and disorganized](#), with many confused about the mission that President Vladimir Putin sent them to the former Soviet state to accomplish and others in Ukrainian territory without clear battle plans or means of resupply.

Disgraced former Army Gen. and CIA Director David Petraeus told [CNN](#) over the weekend when asked about the Russian generals’ deaths that “their command and control has broken down.”

“So what happens is the column gets stopped, an impatient general is sitting back there in his armored – or whatever – vehicle, he goes forward to find out what’s going on because there’s no initiative” among junior officers, Petraeus added. “He gets up there, and the Ukrainians have very, very good snipers, and they’ve just been picking them off, left and right. And at least four of these five are absolutely confirmed, and I think the fifth we’ll hear today.”

Other analysts have agreed with Petraeus’ assessment.

“High casualties among Russian general officers indicate the poor quality of Russian command and control, requiring Russian generals to deploy forward and risk Ukrainian fire to command their forces,” the Institute for the Study of War, a U.S.-based think tank, wrote in an analysis note earlier this month. Still others suggest Ukraine and its backers in the Biden administration should target Russia’s generals in other ways.

“President Biden has called Mr. Putin a ‘[war criminal](#).’ From Ukrainian sources and communications intercepts, it is highly likely that the Biden administration and NATO know the identities of all Russian generals in Ukraine and the commanders of the units accused of war crimes,” Bing West, a former assistant secretary of defense and Marine combat veteran, wrote in [an op-ed](#) in The Wall Street Journal published on Sunday. “Yet the administration hasn’t named them publicly or banned them from the West. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H.W. Bush declared, ‘This will not stand.’ Such a robust declaration from Mr. Biden is noticeable by its absence.”

HEADLINE	03/22 Security strike German airports; disruptions
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/security-strike-at-german-airports-causes-cancelations/
GIST	<p>BERLIN (AP) — A strike on Tuesday by security staff at eight German airports — among them Frankfurt, a major intercontinental hub — led to widespread disruption and flight cancellations.</p> <p>The ver.di union called the all-day strike at Frankfurt, Germany’s busiest airport, as well as Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Hannover, Stuttgart, Duesseldorf and Cologne-Bonn, before a round of pay talks with employers that is set for Thursday. It followed walkouts at several airports last week.</p> <p>At Frankfurt, 108 out of the day’s 790 planned flights had been canceled by Tuesday morning, German news agency dpa reported. Passengers due to start their journeys at the airport were unable to board, though passengers could transfer flights.</p> <p>All 88 planned departures from Hamburg were canceled.</p> <p>Security checks at German airports are under the supervision of federal police but largely conducted by private firms. Security officials in Bavaria are paid in line with a pay deal for public service employees and aren’t striking.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Midtown Manhattan fewer office workers
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/midtown-manhattan-with-fewer-office-workers-imagining-the-unthinkable-11647941402?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>People want to live in Manhattan as much as they ever have. The problem is that not enough people want to work there.</p> <p>And for Midtown Manhattan, a neighborhood built on the five-day-a-week commuter, that is a problem so momentous that after decades as the dominant office district in the country, real-estate developers and city planners are trying to imagine what else it can offer.</p> <p>On the residential side, Manhattan apartment rentals are booming and sales are reaching record levels. But offices in Midtown are attracting barely one-third of their pre-pandemic workforces.</p> <p>“There’s no question that Midtown is going to have to reinvent itself,” said Chris Jones, senior research fellow at the Regional Plan Association, an urban-planning group.</p> <p>Tourism, upgrades to public transit and more dynamic, pedestrian-centered streets would help Midtown attract the people it needs, Mr. Jones said. “The transition is going to be hard. It’s going to be hard on small businesses and low-wage workers that don’t have the resources to adapt,” he said.</p> <p>With offices struggling, city and state officials are discussing revamping New York City zoning to allow for more housing, including in Midtown. After Sept. 11, government subsidies helped lure people to lower Manhattan, where officials had moved to convert unused office space into apartments even prior to the terrorist attacks.</p> <p>Planners, however, are skeptical that Midtown could or should look to housing to save the neighborhood. Many Midtown buildings have large footprints and can’t be converted into apartments as easily as the narrower buildings downtown were starting in the 1990s.</p> <p>In some ways, Midtown is already looking a little bit different. Pebble Bar opened a few weeks ago in Rockefeller Center and was designed to be more upscale and intimate than other Midtown happy-hour</p>

spots, said managing partner Julian Brizzi. The bar serves seafood, not Buffalo wings, and aims to be a place where people come to linger rather than gulp down a beer on their way to catch the train, he said.

“We always envisioned that it would be a hedge against any sort of fluctuations in volume between in-office or remote work,” Mr. Brizzi said. “It was always our intention to operate a business in Midtown that wasn’t reliant on the fact that people were forced to go there to go to work.”

Midtown’s survival is critical for Manhattan, which was home to nearly 11% of all office inventory in the U.S. last year, according to an October report by New York state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli. In 2019, the office sector employed 1.6 million people—a third of all New York City jobs—and contributed two-thirds of the city’s gross product.

Office availability in Manhattan, a measure of vacancy and space about to be vacated, reached a record-high 17.4% in February, according to real-estate firm Colliers. Manhattan offices are currently less in demand than they were after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, when some wondered whether people would ever feel safe working in skyscrapers again.

Manhattan was home to one of the world’s biggest and busiest office districts before the pandemic, with a daytime workforce larger than the entire population of Houston. An estimated 2.6 million people worked in the borough three years ago, 70% of whom commuted in from other parts of the city or its suburbs, according to the Department of City Planning.

Now, after two years of remote work, the formerly bustling Midtown office district feels more than a little hollowed out. A peek inside office towers reveals floors of vacant cubicles. Once-packed commuter trains arrive at Grand Central Terminal and New York Penn Station with ridership at less than half of pre-pandemic levels. Restaurants, bars and shops that depended on heavy foot traffic have gone out of business.

In New York, and other [cities across the country](#), it’s becoming clear that even when people feel safe going out to eat or shop, most don’t want to return to [their daily commutes](#).

New York City Mayor Eric Adams and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul have prodded employers to [bring their workers back](#), but to little effect. Keycard swipes tracked by security company Kastle Systems show that Midtown offices barely cracked one-third of their pre-pandemic workforces in the first two weeks of March, despite falling Covid-19 infection rates.

Even as more companies announce return-to-office dates, many are adopting a hybrid model that will allow employees to work remotely part of the week.

At the same time, co-op and condo sales in Manhattan reached record levels last year, in part due to pent-up demand following limited activity in 2020. The median sales price for all apartments in the borough topped \$1.1 million, the second-highest level of the past decade after 2017, according to the [Douglas Elliman](#) Rental Report prepared by Miller Samuel.

After plummeting in 2020, Manhattan rental costs are surging as tenants compete for a limited number of available properties. The net-effective median rental price climbed to \$3,630 a month in February, 7% higher than two years earlier, according to the Elliman Report.

James Patchett, the former head of New York City’s Economic Development Corporation and current chief executive of multifamily owner A&E Real Estate, said people will still go to the office, just not as often, and they will need more incentives to schlep to their desks.

More developers and landlords will increasingly view high-end restaurants as amenities for their buildings rather than just tenants, he said. One example is Le Pavillon, the Daniel Boulud restaurant on the second floor of SL Green’s new office building One Vanderbilt, next to Grand Central.

On many streets near Grand Central, however, empty storefronts and struggling businesses show the impact of two years of significantly reduced foot traffic.

Retail vacancy around Grand Central has doubled during the pandemic, with about one-fifth of storefronts now vacant, compared with 10% in 2019, according to the Grand Central Partnership, a business-improvement district that covers over 900 retail spaces across 70 square blocks.

Phil's Stationery, an office-supply store on East 47th Street that has been in business since 1973, is seeing about 80% fewer customers compared with two years ago, said owner Samuel Podemski. Before the pandemic, people would queue up to buy notebooks, pens or ink cartridges. Now the store can go an hour without a single customer.

The shop has been able to stay open thanks to Mr. Podemski's savings and rent relief from the landlord. "We rely on the office workers," he said.

New York City suffered steep job losses during the pandemic, and employment there is recovering more slowly than other areas. The Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ said employment among its members who work in office buildings in Manhattan is still down 15% compared with before the pandemic. More than 1,000 commercial-office cleaners are still laid off due to remote work, and 2,000 positions vacated by workers who retired during the pandemic haven't been filled, the union said.

Richard Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and School of Cities, said Midtown faces seismic changes similar to those urban industrial areas experienced in the late 20th century when factories closed and moved away.

"The central business district that we think about is the last gasp of the old Industrial age," Mr. Florida said. "This idea that you have to pack and stack these office workers and they have to commute in at 9 and leave at 5 and work in cubicle farms—it's just silly. It is completely out of touch with the way people work."

Drawing tourists and other visitors, who spend more than residents or office workers, would boost Midtown businesses, said Carl Weisbrod, who helped lead the city's redevelopment efforts in lower Manhattan and is now a senior adviser at the consulting firm HR&A. Rather than focus on residential, Mr. Weisbrod said city officials should focus on improving public transit and making Midtown's congested streets more pleasant for pedestrians through initiatives such as permanent outdoor dining.

"I don't see the introduction of more residents in Midtown to be a magic bullet," Mr. Weisbrod said.

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HEADLINE	03/22 Clues to Covid next moves from sewers
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/clues-to-covid-19s-next-moves-come-from-sewers-11647941403?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>BOSTON—At a sewage treatment plant on a sliver of land in Boston Harbor, trickles of wastewater are pumped into a plastic jug every 15 minutes. Samples from the jugs, analyzed at a lab in nearby Cambridge, Mass., are part of the growing effort to monitor the Covid-19 virus in wastewater across the U.S.</p> <p>On Deer Island in Boston, readings from the system covering 2.4 million people have recently shown virus readings leveling off after a steep decline from this winter's Omicron-driven rise. In some areas, levels of the virus may be edging higher.</p> <p>"The last few days have been a little worrisome," Larry Madoff, medical director of the bureau of infectious disease and laboratory sciences at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, said late last week. "It certainly bears careful watching."</p>

Wastewater sampling here and at hundreds of sites nationwide is once more drawing closer scrutiny from epidemiologists worried the spread of what appears to be a yet-more-contagious version of Omicron, known as BA.2, and rising cases in Europe could soon spoil the latest U.S. recovery. The number of wastewater sites indicating virus increases on a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention dashboard has risen in recent weeks, though the majority of sites still show declining levels.

In Boston and beyond, these systems during the Omicron wave helped quickly detect virus-concentration surges, declines and circulating variants, often before testing and case data. Health authorities believe it will become an increasingly important early-warning tool that can help guide public messaging and other responses, like marshaling resources to surging areas.

But the technique is also suffering some growing pains from a mix of technological, data-interpretation and logistical challenges as U.S. authorities [try to build out a national system](#).

“We’re trying to figure out how you can take that data and turn it into public-health action and how that can be incorporated into a surveillance system,” said Kelly Wroblewski, director of infectious-disease programs at the Association of Public Health Laboratories. “It hasn’t quite matured yet.”

Researchers [determined early in the pandemic](#) they could track the new coronavirus through the sewers. The [low-cost technique](#) has speed and coverage benefits: People can shed virus in their waste before they feel sick enough to get tested. Many never get tests that generate results that can be tallied by public-health officials, especially now that people are self-testing more at home. States have also started closing testing sites and [dialing back daily data reporting](#), making a passive data source like the sewers increasingly important.

“We are really relying more and more on wastewater as testing goes down,” said Loren Hopkins, chief environmental science officer with the Houston Health Department, which [detected Omicron’s presence](#) via wastewater before it confirmed a case in the city.

The CDC established a wastewater surveillance network in late 2020 and added wastewater data to its public Covid-19 dashboard in February. The system currently includes data from more than 700 sampling sites that cover roughly one-quarter of the U.S. population. The agency has a contract with a testing company to provide twice-weekly testing to more sites and is aiming to expand its network into all 50 states within the next few years.

Still, some places aren’t well-suited to wastewater monitoring. Roughly one in five households, concentrated in rural areas, use septic systems that don’t feed into sewers or wastewater treatment plants, federal officials estimate.

“We will have a challenge bringing wastewater surveillance to all communities, particularly those that are very rural,” said Amy Kirby, team lead on the National Wastewater Surveillance System at the CDC. “But we are hopeful that we can continue to get as many communities on board as possible.”

The CDC’s network has hit some challenges in its expansion. The well-established testing program on Boston’s Deer Island is working through some data-collection hurdles before it can submit numbers to the CDC, said Steve Rhode, a laboratory director for the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority.

Some states and facilities aren’t participating. The Wyoming Department of Health stopped its wastewater monitoring system in December after funding for the program ended. There hasn’t been a firm decision on future wastewater monitoring, a department spokeswoman said.

North Dakota monitors wastewater, but some lawmakers and citizens were opposed to reporting the data federally. The state declined to participate in the federal program, the state’s health department said.

	<p>Other states are aiming to build bigger programs. Louisiana has sampling sites in the New Orleans area transmitting data to the CDC. The state wants to build up to 100 sites including cities and places like prisons and nursing homes, said Theresa Sokol, Louisiana's state epidemiologist.</p> <p>Comparing data from different sites can be difficult, water and public-health experts say. Facilities across the country often collect samples at different frequencies or use different analytical approaches. Local factors such as rainfall, the mix of industrial and residential developments and population surges in tourist areas can also affect readings. Some researchers have found workarounds, including measuring substances like other viruses consistently found in humans to normalize the data.</p> <p>At low levels of virus, data gathered from wastewater can also be noisy, and the CDC's current wastewater dashboard can show some confusing readings. It lists percent changes in virus concentrations at individual sites over 15-day periods, but not the virus levels themselves or the trends over time. This can lead to what look like huge increases—some recently topped 2 billion percent—likely in instances where there are changes from low virus levels, agency scientists say. The CDC is working on new ways to standardize and display its data, they say.</p> <p>In Massachusetts, wastewater data are part of a broader picture health authorities are using to gauge trends, said Dr. Madoff of the state's health department. But the sewage samples proved their particular value by previewing the Omicron surge and decline.</p> <p>"It was clearly the first signal," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 FAA official: ex-Boeing pilot lied on MAX
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/faa-official-testifies-former-boeing-pilot-lied-about-737-max-11647909072?mod=hp_lead_pos12
GIST	<p>FORT WORTH, Texas—A Federal Aviation Administration training specialist said a former Boeing Co. pilot lied to her about how a 737 MAX flight-control system worked before two of the jets crashed three years ago.</p> <p>The former Boeing pilot, Mark Forkner, is on trial in Fort Worth, Texas, this week over four counts of wire fraud. Federal prosecutors say Mr. Forkner, who was the aircraft's chief technical pilot during the aircraft's development, deceived his FAA counterpart about the automated cockpit feature later blamed for sending the two jets into fatal nosedives.</p> <p>Stacey Klein, Mr. Forkner's FAA counterpart, recounted how the then-Boeing pilot assured her multiple times that airline pilots wouldn't encounter the flight-control system known as MCAS as he sought to win her approval to remove its mention from airplane manuals and training documents that carriers rely on.</p> <p>"He lied," Ms. Klein said. Had she known that Boeing engineers had expanded MCAS's authority to include low-speed, low-altitude conditions, she would have had to re-evaluate how much training the FAA needed to require for airline pilots.</p> <p>Mr. Forkner has pleaded not guilty. He claims federal prosecutors have targeted him as a scapegoat for the MAX crashes in 2018 and 2019, which claimed 346 lives and disrupted global aviation. Defense attorneys have noted Mr. Forkner isn't an engineer and that many others were involved in the flight-control system's design and certification.</p> <p>Ms. Klein is a key prosecution witness in the Justice Department's case against Mr. Forkner, the sole person charged as the agency seeks to hold individuals accountable for corporate misdeeds. Boeing reached a \$2.5 billion settlement to resolve its role in the criminal investigation.</p>

When Ms. Klein learned the flight-control system had been expanded after the first 737 MAX crash in Indonesia in late 2018, Ms. Klein said she was upset about her dealings with Mr. Forkner, whom she said she earlier met when he worked at the FAA years ago.

“I was shocked, dismayed, sad, angry,” Ms. Klein said. “Because I trusted Mark.” She said it was Mr. Forkner’s “job to inform me of design changes” that could increase training requirements for the 737 MAX.

As head of the FAA’s aircraft evaluation group for the 737 MAX, Ms. Klein’s job was to approve training requirements for pilots who fly the aircraft. Federal prosecutors allege Mr. Forkner deceived Ms. Klein as part of an effort to minimize training requirements for the new aircraft to help airlines avoid potentially expensive simulator training and help the airplane manufacturer make tens of millions of dollars.

Ms. Klein said she felt Mr. Forkner was at times unprofessional when he disagreed with her about potential MAX training requirements. “I felt like he was a bully,” she said.

Ashlee McFarlane, one of Mr. Forkner’s defense attorneys, pressed Ms. Klein under cross examination about missed opportunities to learn about key changes to MCAS, including four meetings she was invited to attend where other Boeing representatives laid out the information.

“I’m not familiar with these meetings,” Ms. Klein said.

Prosecutors have focused much of their case on Mr. Forkner’s 2016 chat messages about his experience with the MCAS flight-control system while in a simulator under development. Mr. Forkner told his colleague in a message: “So I basically lied to the regulators (unknowingly).”

Ms. Klein said Mr. Forkner recounted the simulator experience to her but didn’t correct his assertion that the flight-control system only operated in high-speed conditions pilots wouldn’t encounter during a normal flight.

“He said it went great,” Ms. Klein said of Mr. Forkner. “There were a few kinks to work out.”

Mr. Forkner’s defense attorneys have said Mr. Forkner didn’t lie but was instead complaining about problems with the simulator and that Boeing engineers left him out of the loop on changes to the flight-control system.

Ms. Klein, under cross examination, acknowledged “it is very common” for pilots like Mr. Forkner to experience such simulator problems. And she acknowledged that at times it appeared she had more information than Mr. Forkner about aspects of the MAX’s development.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia increasingly bombing civilian areas
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-rejects-russian-ultimatum-on-embattled-mariupol-11647858599?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine—Russian attacks struck Kyiv, Odessa and other locations across Ukraine as Moscow appears to be shifting its battle plan to compel Ukraine to relinquish claims to its southern and eastern territory.</p> <p>The Ukrainian government on Monday rebuffed Russia’s demand to surrender the embattled port city of Mariupol, where intense fighting continued.</p> <p>As its military offensive against Ukraine has stalled, Russia is increasingly bombing civilian areas in what is evolving into a war of attrition aimed at pressuring the government in Kyiv into granting concessions and acquiescing to Moscow’s demands.</p>

The seeming tactical shift comes as President Biden is heading to Europe this week for meetings with allies and partners in NATO, the G-7 and European states, including Poland. They are expected to discuss deterrence efforts, humanitarian relief and the campaign of [sanctions against Russia](#).

Russia's foreign ministry on Monday warned relations between Moscow and Washington were "on the verge of a rupture." Moscow summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan on Monday to hand him a note of protest over [Mr. Biden's comment](#) that his Russian counterpart, [Vladimir Putin](#), is a "war criminal."

State Department spokesman Ned Price said despite the tensions, the Biden administration is committed to maintaining lines of communication with Moscow, and he added, "It's awfully rich to hear a country speak about 'inappropriate comments' when that same country is engaged in mass slaughter" of civilians.

Mr. Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and U.K. Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) discussed their concerns about [Russia's tactics in Ukraine](#) during a call Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

The U.S. has imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia for its assault on Ukraine, helping [cut the Russian economy off](#) from the global financial system. The U.S. has also provided Ukraine a range of military assistance to battle Russian forces, including antitank weapons and antiaircraft missiles that Ukrainian forces have employed to exact a heavy toll on the invading military.

Near Kyiv, where fighting has settled into a stalemate, Russian forces appeared to degrade Ukrainian positions with artillery strikes and long-range missiles. On Monday, the rumble of artillery barrages was nearly constant.

In an online post, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said 8,057 people had been rescued Monday via eight humanitarian corridors in several cities, including Kyiv and Mariupol. "We also managed to deliver 200 tons of humanitarian aid," he added.

Overnight, Russia destroyed a shopping mall that Moscow alleged was used as an arms depot. The strike gutted a 10-story building at the mall and shattered windows hundreds of yards away. Russia's defense ministry on Monday released a video of the strike and evidence that it said showed Ukraine was using the facility to store arms and used the parking lot to launch missiles at Russian troops in the front lines near Kyiv.

Ukrainian officials said at least eight people died in the attack.

The military cordoned off the shopping mall, where troops could be seen Monday morning loading corpses into vans. A Ukrainian website said a photo of the mall had circulated on social media before the strike, showing several Ukrainian military trucks parked there. The government has been urging Ukrainians to refrain from circulating photos of the country's military on social media that might betray their positions to Moscow.

The Russian attacks around military areas have prompted fears that the country has agents working inside Ukraine and spotting targets for Moscow.

The city's mayor said he would impose another curfew on the Ukrainian capital, lasting 35 hours from 8 p.m. local time on Monday.

The attacks unfolded as Russia demanded Ukraine surrender Mariupol. Mikhail Mizintsev, the head of the Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center, said Sunday that Kyiv had to respond to Russia's offer by 5 a.m. Moscow time on Monday, according to Interfax.

The Ukrainian government early Monday rebuffed the Russian demand on Twitter. It cited the country's Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk as saying that turning over the city wasn't an option and her demanding that Russia give civilians safe passage to exit.

The bombardment strategy Russia is employing has inflicted [a particularly heavy toll](#) on Mariupol, where fighting has reached the streets. Ukrainian officials said an art school where around 400 people had been sheltering was bombed by Russia, trapping people beneath the rubble. Their condition couldn't be determined. Days earlier, a [theater in the city](#) where large numbers of people had sheltered was bombed.

Mariupol is a strategic objective for Moscow as it attempts to open an overland corridor to the [Russia-annexed Crimean Peninsula](#) and shift the momentum in its three-week-old invasion. Russia has so far failed to take any big Ukrainian cities since the start of its invasion.

In areas that Moscow has seized, it is trying to quell unrest. On Monday, Russian troops wounded one protester and dispersed others with flash grenades and tear gas in the southern city of Kherson.

Russia's military operation has been proceeding along three fronts: northward from the Crimean Peninsula, southward from Belarus toward Kyiv, and westward from occupied areas in Ukraine's south toward Mykolaiv and, ultimately, the port city of Odessa.

Military analysts said Russia may be increasingly looking for an operational pause to regroup its forces and prepare for another offensive, leading to a temporary break in fighting short of a full cease-fire, which would require a breakthrough in so far fruitless negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, or further bombardment of urban areas.

"We're likely to see a lot more destruction, and far less territory trading hands," said Michael Kofman, an expert on the Russian military at CNA Corp, adding that Russia is likely to continue targeting cities. "If Ukrainian forces are using urban areas for defense, and the urban environment favors the defender tremendously, what would be your strategy?"

The latest Russian ultimatum came as senior U.S. officials also voiced suspicions that the Kremlin is adopting a new strategy after almost a month of fighting with halting progress while inflicting a heavy humanitarian toll on the country. The new approach, they believe, focuses on securing a so-called land bridge between western Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, and expanding Russian control of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin also appears to be trying to force the Ukrainian government to accept neutrality between Russia and the West.

Russia's assault on Ukraine has forced more than 10 million people to abandon their homes, the United Nations said, with the scale of the humanitarian disaster showing little sign of easing as Moscow presses its attack with missile strikes and artillery fire. The U.N. estimates roughly 3.5 million people have left Ukraine since the Russian offensive began Feb. 24.

The World Health Organization said the fighting is taking an ever greater toll on Ukraine's healthcare system. The U.N. agency Monday said it had registered 14 deaths and 36 injuries in attacks on the healthcare system tied to the offensive. The nature of the attacks ranged from abductions to heavy weapons to obstruction of medical professionals, the WHO said.

Russia claimed on Monday to have seized a Ukrainian military command headquarters and taken 61 Ukrainian prisoners of war, and reported a cruise missile attack on an alleged training center for foreign and Ukrainian fighters in the Rivne region of western Ukraine, which it says killed more than 80 Ukrainian and foreign fighters.

Ukraine confirmed the missile attack on the training ground in the Rivne region, while saying the intensity of Russian combat air operations had eased. It also said Russia had shelled Odessa.

The two sides exchanged accusations for damage at a chemical plant in the city of Sumy in eastern Ukraine on Monday morning where an ammonia gas leak was detected.

	<p>The Ukrainian and Russian sides agreed on eight humanitarian corridors for Monday, including some for Mariupol, Ms. Vereshchuk said.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused Ukraine of obstructing those corridors. Ukraine in the past has said Russia has attacked such lines of passage.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia oligarchs' yachts hit the high seas
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-oligarchs-yachts-hit-the-high-seas-11647876326?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5
GIST	<p>BARCELONA—Just a few weeks ago, the Galactica Super Nova, a 230-foot yacht, was up for sale here.</p> <p>Potential buyers from the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates had recently been aboard the vessel, which comes with a waterfall and an infinity pool on one of its upper decks—and a price tag of about \$83 million.</p> <p>But on Feb. 25, a day after Russia invaded Ukraine, the ship's captain returned early from vacation, showing up pierside. He gave the crew 48 hours to get ready to sail. "We are leaving Sunday," he ordered, according to a person aboard at the time. The ship got under way a full day ahead of that schedule.</p> <p>Galactica is owned by Vagit Alekperov, president, chief executive and the largest shareholder of Russian oil company Lukoil, according to SuperYacht Fan, which maintains a database of owners of the world's biggest yachts, and according to a former crew member. Mr. Alekperov also owns the shipyard that built the yacht.</p> <p>Mr. Alekperov isn't sanctioned, but he is on a Treasury list of political figures and oligarchs the U.S. says have close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. That makes his yacht a potential target in any subsequent sanctions. Lukoil didn't respond to a request for comment on behalf of Mr. Alekperov.</p> <p>The Ukraine invasion and the raft of sanctions the West has unleashed in response have triggered a scramble among Russia's richest people to move their biggest assets out from under the threat of the widening restrictions. Western capitals have sanctioned Russia's central bank, other banks and companies and individuals they hope will exert pressure on Mr. Putin to change course in Ukraine.</p> <p>Governments can freeze assets of sanctioned individuals indefinitely, without proving criminality. Sanctions can be challenged, but the legal effort can take years.</p> <p>Amid this broader dragnet, the superyachts of Russia's super rich have taken on outsize symbolism. France and Italy, in sometimes dramatic operations, have seized a handful of vessels they say belong to sanctioned individuals. In Norway, a Russian-linked yacht is stuck there because no one will sell it fuel. Another yacht, owned by a sanctioned Russian businessman, was partly scuttled by its chief mechanic, a Ukrainian, on the island of Majorca. The vessel was later seized by Spanish authorities.</p> <p>President Biden, addressing Russia's politically connected elite, promised in his State of the Union address in late February to "find and seize your yachts, your luxury apartments, your private jets."</p> <p>A few days after setting sail from Barcelona, the Galactica arrived in Tivat, Montenegro. Montenegro isn't a European Union member, so isn't beholden to EU sanctions. The day the yacht pulled in, however, the country's government said it would join in enforcing EU sanctions. The Galactica was on its way before dawn the next day, according to ship-tracking sites.</p> <p>On March 8, another yacht pulled out of Barcelona: the 460-foot Solaris, owned by Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich. The ship had been undergoing repairs when it made preparations to depart Barcelona. "It was clear that they wanted to leave the port as soon as possible," said a worker at the port.</p>

Solaris eventually arrived in Tivat, too, where it anchored. Nobody left the ship, according to dockworkers, whose view of a small village across the bay was completely obscured by the towering vessel. An employee of a yacht agency in Tivat boarded the Solaris just long enough to check the passports and paperwork of the 50-odd crew, according to an executive at the port.

Solaris's captain had planned to take on fuel, this executive said, but he scrapped the idea and departed hastily, instead. Representatives for Mr. Abramovich haven't responded to requests for comment.

The yacht is currently off the coast of Turkey, according to ship-tracking websites.

The radio-positioning beacon of the Galactica Super Nova was switched off shortly after leaving Tivat, making it impossible to track. A yacht fan spotted it in Turkey, however, and sent a photo to a YouTube channel popular with yacht watchers.

Other vessels owned by Russian oligarchs haven't made it to open water. Several days after the start of the invasion, Spain's General Directorate of the Merchant Marine circulated a message to harbor authorities asking them to report Russian-owned or -managed megayachts, without giving any explanation.

Spanish officials boarded the Valerie, a 280-foot yacht, while it was in Barcelona. They said they are investigating the ship's ownership. SuperYacht Fan lists the ship as being owned by Russian oligarch Sergei Chemezov, head of state defense contractor Rostec. Rostec didn't respond to a request for comment.

Dilbar, another superyacht that is regularly spotted in Barcelona, had been undergoing repairs in Hamburg when war broke out. The U.S. says the yacht is owned by Russian metals and mining oligarch Alisher Usmanov, whom Washington has sanctioned.

The yacht's surveyor, Lloyd's List, recently "struck off" the vessel. That designation makes Dilbar uninsurable, according to a person familiar with its legal status. Almost all of its 95 crew were told they were being laid off, according to yacht professionals in contact with the crew.

"That ship can't sail," said a captain from another yacht. He said he was getting emailed résumés from crew looking for work. A spokesman for Mr. Usmanov's holding company USM Group didn't respond to a request for comment.

In the Norwegian fiord town of Narvik, Rob Lancaster is the captain of Ragnar, whose corporate record indicates it is owned by a company with at least one Russian director. SuperYacht Fan cites the owner as Vladimir Strzhalkovsky, a former KGB intelligence officer, who isn't sanctioned. Representatives of Mr. Strzhalkovsky couldn't be reached.

That association has drawn unwanted local notice. Police boarded the ship on March 2, checked the vessel's documents, and then left, Capt. Lancaster said. Since the invasion started, he said the vessel has been refused refueling by local suppliers. The crew has been barbecuing freshly caught cod, instead.

"We did not realize why there was so much fuss with us," the captain said. "It happened so quickly."

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HEADLINE	03/21 States pause gas taxes; prices near highs
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/maryland-georgia-pause-gas-taxes-with-prices-near-record-highs-11647880317?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	Lawmakers across the U.S. are pushing to pause the collection of gasoline taxes to give drivers a temporary break at the pump as fuel costs hover near record highs .

Maryland and Georgia are temporarily cutting state gasoline taxes as fuel prices have surged world-wide amid [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), which sent shock waves throughout the oil market. California is considering giving drivers a \$400 rebate to help cushion the blow of high gasoline prices.

Lawmakers in Illinois, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New York and Tennessee are also weighing whether to suspend their state taxes on gasoline.

And at the federal level, some members of Congress are calling on the Biden administration [to suspend federal taxes on fuel](#).

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, signed emergency legislation Friday that suspends the state's 36.1-cent-per-gallon tax on gasoline for 30 days. It also pauses the state's 36.85-cent-per-gallon tax for diesel fuel.

"This bipartisan action will provide some relief from the pain at the pump," Mr. Hogan said Friday. "This is, of course, not a cure-all, and market instability will continue to lead to fluctuations in prices, but we will continue to use every tool at our disposal to provide relief for Marylanders."

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, a Republican, also signed legislation Friday suspending the state's 29.1-cent-per-gallon tax on gasoline and the 32.6-cent-per-gallon tax on diesel fuel through the end of May.

The suspension of the gasoline taxes will "ease the burden consumers are feeling at the pump," Mr. Kemp said [in a video statement](#) posted to Twitter. "We are doing our part to lessen the impact on your wallet."

Critics of a suspension say oil companies might further raise the price of fuel if the federal tax is paused. Others point out that the gasoline tax only makes up a small part of the overall cost of gasoline.

"The savings are going to be so minimal for everyday Americans," said Lucy Dadayan, a senior research associate at the Urban Institute, a think tank based in Washington.

Ms. Dadayan said rebates for low-income households would provide a more targeted approach that would help those who need it most.

Gas prices were inching up at the beginning of the year but hit record highs [after Russia invaded Ukraine](#). The average national price of a gallon of unleaded gasoline peaked at \$4.33 on March 11, according to AAA. The average price has fallen to \$4.25, which is still a 48% increase over a year ago.

Suspending gasoline taxes at the state level also means officials would have less money at their disposal to spend on road and highway maintenance unless it is offset in some way. State officials that back gas-tax suspensions say this is one of the few tools they can use to give drivers some relief.

State lawmakers in Florida approved a measure earlier this month that suspends the state's 25-cent-per-gallon tax of gasoline for the entire month of October, which comes after the end of the state's busiest tourist season.

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, and legislative leaders have also reached an agreement to pause state collections on gasoline taxes through the end of June.

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HEADLINE	03/22 Russia bombing cities beyond recognition
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/22/russia-ukraine-war-news-putin-live-updates/
GIST	Ukraine is still holding bombed-out Mariupol, rebuffing Russian efforts to fully occupy the strategic southern port city where Moscow has been accused of committing war crimes. Russian forces appear to be making only limited progress in other parts of Ukraine, with a British intelligence report finding "most forces largely stalled in place" for another day, even as heavy air and artillery bombardments continue to

pummel several Ukrainian cities, destroying infrastructure and terrorizing civilians as the war stretches into its third week.

Russia's invasion — [which has forced nearly one in four Ukrainians from their homes](#) — has left some cities bombarded beyond recognition, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Monday, as air raid sirens blasting across the country capped another day of strikes in Kyiv, Mykolaiv and Odessa. [Satellite images released Monday offer a bird's-eye view of the destruction in Mariupol](#), showing large swaths of bombed-out neighborhoods, with gray and black smoke marking smoldering ruins. Yet Zelensky, while reiterating he was ready to talk directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin, [appeared to quash the prospect of a quick peace deal](#) Monday night, insisting any compromises to end the invasion would need to be approved by the Ukrainian people in a referendum.

President Biden, who [will travel to Belgium and Poland this week](#), cautioned that Russia's tactics make get even more aggressive. Biden warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use biological and chemical weapons in Ukraine but did not provide evidence, and confirmed that Russia has used hypersonic missiles — [which travel faster than five times the speed of sound and have not previously been used in combat](#) — in a move he suggested was in response to Moscow's stalled ground campaign.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Covid leads to higher risk Type 2 diabetes?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/03/21/covid-infection-diabetes/
GIST	<p>People who had covid-19 were at greater risk of developing Type 2 diabetes within a year than those who managed to avoid the coronavirus, according to a large review of patient records released Monday.</p> <p>The finding is true even for people who had less severe or asymptomatic forms of coronavirus infection, though the chances of developing new-onset diabetes were greater as the severity of covid symptoms increased, according to researchers who reviewed the records of more than 181,000 Department of Veterans Affairs patients diagnosed with coronavirus infections between March 1, 2020, and Sept. 30, 2021.</p> <p>Their data was compared to the medical records of more than 4.1 million VA patients who were not infected during the same period and another 4.28 million who received medical care from VA in 2018 and 2019. This kind of study cannot prove cause and effect, but it showed a strong association between the two diseases.</p> <p>Overall, the researchers calculated that people diagnosed with covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, were 46 percent more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes for the first time or be prescribed medication to control their blood sugar. The research was released Monday in the Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology, a medical journal.</p> <p>Put another way, 2 in 100 covid patients were more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes, a condition in which the pancreas makes insufficient amounts of the hormone insulin, leaving blood sugar levels poorly controlled. Type 2 diabetes can cause damage to kidneys, nerves, blood vessels and the heart, among its other effects.</p> <p>The results have implications for the more than 471 million people known to have been infected during the pandemic, nearly 80 million of them in the United States, and especially for people suffering from long-haul covid.</p> <p>“For the broader public, if you’ve had covid-19, you need to pay attention to your blood sugar,” said Ziyad Al-Aly, chief of research and development at VA St. Louis Health Care System, who led the review.</p> <p>Previous smaller studies and physicians who have treated covid patients have noted an apparent increase in new diabetes diagnoses associated with coronavirus infection. But Al-Aly said his review was the largest</p>

	<p>consideration of the issue and looked at the greatest length of time after the acute phase of an infection — from 31 days after infection to a median of nearly one year per patient.</p> <p>VA patients tend to be older than the general population, with more White people and males. But Al-Aly said the large numbers of people involved made him confident that his findings were applicable to the public.</p> <p>“The risk was evident in all subgroups,” including women, racial minorities, younger people and people with different body mass indexes, he said.</p> <p>More than 99 percent of the infected VA patients developed Type 2 diabetes, as opposed to Type 1, a condition in which insulin-producing cells in the pancreas stop producing the hormone entirely. Al-Aly speculated that the cells’ reduced efficiency may be caused by inflammation, produced either by the virus itself or the body’s response to it.</p> <p>“Taken together,” the researchers wrote, “current evidence suggests that diabetes is a facet of the multifaceted long covid syndrome and that post-acute care strategies of people with covid-19 should include identification and management of diabetes.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Russia halts WWII Japan peace treaty talks
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/22/russia-japan-peace-treaty-ukraine-sanctions/
GIST	<p>TOKYO — Russia said Monday it would halt negotiations with Japan regarding a post-World War II peace treaty in response to Tokyo’s escalating sanctions over Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine — the latest sign of deteriorating bilateral relations.</p> <p>In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said the country has no intention of continuing peace talks, which had been stalled since 2020. It blamed Japan for its “anti-Russian policy” and said it would terminate visa-free trips by Japanese citizens to a chain of islands between Japan and Russia, and withdraw from joint economic projects on the islands.</p> <p>Japan has imposed wide-reaching economic sanctions on Russia since last month, in a dramatic turn away from its years of rapprochement with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Japan and Russia never signed a formal peace treaty ending World War II hostilities because of a long-running territorial dispute over the islands off Hokkaido, in northern Japan. The two countries signed a joint declaration in 1956 ending the state of war but have not signed an actual peace treaty.</p> <p>Japan has sought to show a strong response to the Russian invasion alongside the Group of Seven major economies, particularly amid concerns that Russia’s invasion could embolden an increasingly assertive China, especially in regard to the self-ruled island of Taiwan that Beijing considers a breakaway province.</p> <p>Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Japan “strongly protested” Russia’s decision.</p> <p>“The current situation has arisen completely as a result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and Russia’s response to try to shift this onto Japan-Russia relations is extremely unjustified and absolutely unacceptable,” Kishida said.</p> <p>Tokyo and Moscow have held peace negotiations on and off since the 1956 declaration, most recently during the tenure of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who worked to improve relations with Russia. Abe, who stepped down in 2020, made the peace treaty and territorial settlement with Putin one of his diplomatic priorities. He met with Putin 27 times over eight years in an effort to make Moscow a strategic partner and keep it from drawing closer to China.</p> <p>Since 2020, however, the bilateral relationship has cooled, as Russia has not altered its relations with China or its stance toward the territorial dispute with Japan that dates to World War II.</p>

	<p>On Monday, shortly after the ministry’s announcement, the Russian Embassy in London tweeted a photo of the islands — which Japan claims and Russia occupies — using the Russian name for them.</p> <p>In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Tokyo has taken an increasingly assertive approach, ramping up sanctions, including by revoking Russia’s “most favored nation” trade status and targeting Russian financial institutions and elites.</p> <p>Tokyo has pledged at least \$100 million in emergency humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and taken the unusual step of accepting Ukrainian refugees. Japan also has begun shipping helmets and other nonlethal military gear, another extraordinary step by a country that has a self-imposed arms export ban because of its militaristic past.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Calif. drought strangling farming industry
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/03/21/california-drought-vanishing-farms/
GIST	<p>FIVE POINTS, Calif. — The school is disappearing.</p> <p>Westside Elementary opened its doors nearly a century ago here in the San Joaquin Valley, among the most productive agricultural regions on earth. As recently as 1995, nearly 500 students filled its classrooms. Now 160 students attend and enrollment is falling fast.</p> <p>This was where the children of farmworkers learned to read and write, often next to the children of the farm owners who employed their parents. But the farms are also vanishing, as hundreds of thousands of acres of rich soil are left unplanted each year.</p> <p>The hard truth here, the one that fundamentally shapes the lives of those in the valley, is that water is disappearing. So is a way of life, a core of California economic culture, and a place that provides a nation struggling under the rising rate of inflation with a quarter of its food.</p> <p>“This is getting progressively worse each year,” said Baldomero Hernandez, the principal of Westside Elementary, who has lived in this hot, hazy valley for more than six decades. “And it is all because of a lack of water.”</p> <p>California’s drought is intensifying as it enters a third year, and along with much else here in the San Joaquin, the hope that a wet end to 2021 would bring more water has disappeared, too. The same sentiment holds across much of the parched American west.</p> <p>After a rainy and snow-filled December, the state endured its driest start to a year in at least a century. The end-of-year storms that raised the level of state reservoirs and brought a bounty of essential snow to the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges are a distant memory.</p> <p>A survey this month found that the year’s historically dry start has resulted in a snowpack more than 60 percent below average. Not a single major reservoir is filled to its average for this time of year. The one that serves the water district here, the nation’s largest by area, is less than half full as the state’s wet season ends this month.</p> <p>Wind and wildfire have been more common than rain this year. Less than half an inch of rain fell one day last week on Sacramento, the capital 180 miles north of here through the valley, to break a record 66-day streak without precipitation during winter months.</p> <p>The whiplash has prompted the federal Central Valley Project, the vast Depression-era system of pumps, aqueducts and reservoirs that provides much of this region’s surface water, to declare a second straight year of no water deliveries. The announcement means farmers across the valley must rely on depleted groundwater supplies and what they have been able to store.</p>

Last week, Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) announced an additional \$22.8 million in aid for what his office called “an immediate drought emergency.” The state, too, announced earlier this year that it would provide only 15 percent of its scheduled water deliveries, which primarily serve residential customers in Southern California. On Friday, given the withering recent weather, state water officials cut deliveries to 5 percent.

About one-third of the drought relief money will go toward encouraging conservation efforts, which have proven unsuccessful so far. In recent weeks, hundreds of farmers and residents have gathered for drought “town halls,” mostly in the rural north, where the message has been to prepare for a planting season with the scant water on hand.

“There’s a basic question that we need to address and that is do we want to sustain irrigated agriculture in California?” said Tom Birmingham, general manager of Westlands Water District, which oversees federal water deliveries to more than 700 farms here spread over 1,000 square miles.

“If the answer is yes, then we need to determine how we’re going to invest in the infrastructure we need and what policies need to be changed to preserve it,” he continued. “If the answer is no, then how are we going to deal with the socio-economic impacts of its elimination?”

Those consequences can already be seen in the heart of California’s nearly \$50 billion annual agriculture industry with implications for the nation’s food supply and the state’s long-term environmental health.

California’s Central Valley, which includes the San Joaquin, produces around 8 percent of the nation’s fruits, vegetables, dairy products and other food, as measured by value, according to the federal government.

That translates into roughly a quarter of the nation’s food, according to federal government statistics, and 40 percent of its fruits and vegetables. Farmers in the Westlands district produce nearly \$2 billion worth of food and fiber crops annually.

But the scarcity of water and the now-exorbitant price for it has prompted many farmers to leave large tracts of land fallow, an alarming trend that is accelerating with each dry year.

According to a UC Merced study conducted for the state, California farmers left nearly 400,000 acres of agricultural land unplanted last year due to a lack of water. The result, the study found, was a direct economic cost to farmers of \$1.1 billion and the loss of nearly 9,000 agricultural jobs.

Nearly all of the fallowed land is here in the Central Valley. Farmers in the Westlands district left 200,000 acres idle last year — an area almost five times the size of Washington D.C. — and some say they expect to leave even more unplanted this year.

The environmental implications of the drought are also grave. In 2014, the state legislature passed a law that requires water districts to eliminate any “overdraft” in pumping — removing ground water faster than it can be replenished — within two decades of its passage.

Westlands water officials say groundwater within the district is being pumped today at almost twice the rate deemed sustainable. Hundreds of groundwater wells are running dry as the water table sinks with each dry year.

“We’re on a collision course with economics,” said Michael Wara, a senior research scholar at Stanford’s Woods Institute for the Environment. “We’re going to end up fallowing millions of acres, so politically what does that look like? I think the decision is being made, although no one is making it, about the future of agriculture. And I think the answer is not what people want.”

The California conundrum

This is a state where nearly all the water comes from one end — the north — and the vast majority of the population lives in the other.

It is a dilemma of geography and planning that has shaped California's politics for a century, inspired on-the-ground violence and pop-culture monuments such as "Chinatown," and more recently placed environmentalists in conflict with farmers.

The state's well-organized environmental lobby argues that farmers for too long have received too much of a scarce commodity, primarily at the expense of habitat essential to salmon, smelt and other wildlife.

In 1992, Congress passed the Central Valley Project Improvement Act, which requires that 800,000 acre-feet of water be used to protect fish and habitat annually. That amount is almost as much as Westlands' annual federal allocation.

Farmers, some still old California families but increasingly large corporations, say such decisions, including many made at the state level, are killing the industry.

The surface water here is delivered first by the Sacramento River, its headwaters in the far north near Mount Shasta. From there it rushes south toward the capital and swerves slightly west for miles, until it joins the San Joaquin River to form a vast delta east of the San Francisco Bay.

The Central Valley Project then pumps the water south through 400 miles of aqueducts to eventually irrigate the almonds and pistachios, garlic and lettuce, and tomatoes and citrus in this valley and beyond. This is part of what Birmingham calls California's "engineered ecosystem."

What farmers want is a larger share of the water, as well as more dams and reservoirs built to conserve rainfall in wet years. They argue that California has plenty of water, but public policy and plumbing have hampered the way it is managed and delivered.

They received some good news last week. On Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency announced it would loan \$2.2 billion to help finance a decades-long planned federal reservoir north of Sacramento. That is roughly half the planning and construction costs of the Sites Reservoir, whose final approval, even with this essential financial boost, is still years away.

"It is challenging for an optimist like me who has deep ties to the community and great affection for it to see the stranglehold that state and federal regulators have on the key to our economy," said Diane Sharp, the mayor of Hanford and a fifth-generation resident of the valley. "Many are upset by this. They believe they are losing control of a life they have had for generations."

Sharp, 58, is upbeat and garrulous. Her father and grandfather worked in the valley as water-rights lawyers and she has lived on a farm. Her family business is commercial real estate, among other holdings.

But it is agriculture here that floats the economy, and in Hanford today that is mostly nuts, dairy, cherries, peaches and apricots. What has helped Hanford, with a population of 56,000, weather the decline in agriculture is an abundance of nearby jobs in several prisons.

"The pride factor is really important here," Sharp said. "We are justifiably proud that we are known as a place that feeds the world. So when we hit these droughts, which are a function of how much rain we get but also of public policy, it is hard to see how we are able to produce as we have. Our ability is being restricted. It stinks."

The state's shifting climate — from cold to hot, wet to dry in rapid turns — also means there is simply less water here than there was decades ago. In the last water year, which runs from October through September, the quick turn in climate resulted in only 20 percent of snowmelt making it into aquifers. The rest evaporated.

"We're seeing the effects of these very dry and warm temperatures that are driving this," said Jeanine Jones, the drought manager for California Department of Water Resources. "So far this water year we have

been warm, but we haven't been as dry, so fingers crossed we do better on runoff this winter. We'll have to see how that happens."

The end of something

This crossroads town is among a crescent of once-thriving, now-declining places west of Fresno, the state's agricultural capital.

Once a primary destination for Latino immigrants, the area now has the air of resigned frustration that in many nearby communities has replaced abiding hope.

There is still evidence, though, of its spirit in an against-the-odds kind of way.

"The drought puts us on edge and we hope for rain," said Jonathan Meza, a 30-year-old entrepreneur in Mendota, the self-proclaimed cantaloupe capital of the world. "And the rest of the world should be worried about what is happening here."

Meza just opened Oasis, the town's first carwash. Operating on 80 percent recycled water, Meza wants the five-month-old business to stand as evidence of hopeful investment in Mendota, a luxury in a dusty, threadbare place.

"This is a town of hard-working people who came here for the American Dream," he said. "They will always adapt."

Signs along the two-lane highways that crisscross the west valley create a sense of driving through an angry neighborhood email group.

"California is running on empty," one sign at the crossroads in the center of Five Points reads. "Build Dams Now."

Another: "Newsom: Stop Dumping Our Farm Water in the Ocean."

Another: "Newsom: Stop Wasting Our Dam Water."

Then there are the "For Sale" signs. "940 acres. Mature Pistachios," a staked sign reads, pointing two miles down Mt. Whitney Ave.

Farming has always been a long-game business. The fat years help farmers survive the lean ones. But the changing environment has disrupted the balance.

Over the last 35 years, as the climate has shifted to one of extremes, federal water deliveries have averaged less than half their scheduled annual amount. The effect can be seen along Mt. Whitney Ave.

Mark Borba lives along the flat stretch of road in the town of Riverdale, past the empty big-top circus tent and service station selling nearly \$6-a-gallon gasoline.

He is the fourth generation of his family to farm the land — in his case, 8,500 acres that he plants with almonds, garlic, tomatoes, lettuce and melons. He stages the crops carefully — garlic is harvested in May, when he needs to concentrate his water on almonds and other crops — to spread his supply out over the course of a year.

He has received no scheduled water deliveries from the Central Valley Project in four of the last ten years.

Borba fallowed 1,800 acres of his land last year and will do the same this year. Water costs have jumped from \$7.50 an acre-foot, when he took his first Central Valley Project water delivery in 1967, to \$280 an acre-foot today.

But there will be no water deliveries this year anyway. So he will pump it from the ground, as will his neighbors.

“From that point, it has been a downward slide, partly because of the climate and partly because of regulation,” said Borba, a fit 71-year-old, referring to the advent of the three-decade-old Central Valley Improvement Act. “People are spending their equity now to buy water in hopes of keeping their investment alive.”

Cotton, sugar beets, melons and other row crops filled the valley when Borba’s family began farming it. Those are no longer cost effective, and the shift to more lucrative crops such as almonds and pistachios have remade his farm and the valley landscape, blooming snow white from the nut trees on a recent afternoon.

He was born here, grew up here, and has worked this land ever since.

“You want to know the bad news? I’m the last,” said Borba, who recently put his farm up for sale after his 44-year-old son, Derek, told him he would not be running it and was considering a move out of state. Borba and his wife may follow, given that four grandkids would be heading out with his son.

“You know who I am talking to about this? Canadian pension funds, Wall Street hedge funds and big real estate investment firms,” Borba said. “They are saying this is an investment. But they are not talking about growing anything. Who will?”

There are no promises he can make. The fallowing means exodus.

“We’re just living this year by year,” Hernandez said. “People come to this place now and say it looks like the Third World. I see it as beautiful.”

Something beautiful

Hernandez, the elementary school principal, moved into this valley with his parents in 1960. The family immigrated from Michoacan, Mexico, a common northern journey then and now. He was five years old.

“Back in the day there was a ranch on every corner,” he said. “Now all these families that have been here since the 1920s are selling and moving simply because of the price of water.”

The school, tidy and chirping with kids scampering around a blacktop one recent morning, opened in 1926. Hernandez became its principal nearly three decades ago, and today everybody in the area knows “Baldo.”

At the time he took over here, thousands of seasonal workers would fill this side of the valley to pick lettuce, putting their kids in Hernandez’s care during long days in the fields.

The school’s enrollment was stable, although warning signs began to arise with the arrival of big corporate farms that seldom provide housing for workers. By 2010, the school still had 262 students, enough where some classes had more than 30 children in seats.

But in recent years of drought and uncertainty the decline has been steeper, and as he seeks public support for a bond measure to finance a campus overhaul, his sales pitch amounts to “all your kids deserve a good education.”

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HEADLINE	03/22 Chechnya losses undoing of strongman?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/chechnyas-losses-in-ukraine-may-be-leader-ramzan-kadyrovs-undoing

Russia's invasion of [Ukraine](#) is primarily Vladimir Putin's war, but if there is a second man whose name and reputation will be tied to the devastation unleashed by Moscow it is Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

His fighters were part of the first wave assault on the country, and died in large numbers around the Hostomel airbase, with one key commander among those killed.

Elite Chechen squads were also reportedly recruited for failed attempts to assassinate key Ukrainian leaders in the first 48 hours of the invasion, western intelligence said.

More recently Kadyrov's men have appeared among forces imposing a brutal siege on the port city of Mariupol, where targets have included a maternity hospital and the suffering of hundreds of thousands has become emblematic of Ukrainian pain.

And the Chechen leader himself even posted a video on social media recently, which he claimed was a strategy session filmed in a basement bunker in Ukraine. He used it to menace Kyiv residents with the prospect of a "personal visit".

Ukrainian intelligence services say the video was likely false bravado, filmed at home in Chechnya. Intelligence from phones and internet suggested he never crossed into Ukraine, and even Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to endorse the video, saying the Kremlin had "no data" on a possible trip into Ukraine.

But regardless of veracity, the footage was useful propaganda, signalling how closely and enthusiastically Kadyrov has associated himself with this war.

He appears to see the invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to boost both his power and his profile. Sending his men is a way for Kadyrov to prove his loyalty to the Russian leader whose patronage is the basis of his authority.

"There are many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Chechens who hate him, who resent him and many families who are in a state of latent blood feud against him and his family, so Kadyrov understands if he wants to survive he needs Russia and Vladimir Putin's backing," said Emil Solomon Aslan from the Institute of Political Studies at Charles University in Prague.

"That's why he wants to display absolute loyalty, show he is useful, can come and do very grandiose stuff."

They are somewhat irregular forces for Russia to deploy. There is constant feuding between Chechen commanders and Russian intelligence, including petty public insults (a recent video showed fighters using feminine grammar to mock a male FSB leader) and little integration with the regular army. In videos, troops highlight that they are under the command of Kadyrov, not the Russian military hierarchy.

Unlike Russians, the Chechen troops carry mobile phones, post to social media and call the conflict a war – ignoring the Kremlin's propaganda ruling that the carnage must be called a "special operation".

Their prominent role despite all this is a tribute to Kadyrov's reach, a public show of how a great power's military depends on his band of Chechen fighters.

This month he launched an Arabic language channel on Telegram, apparently to capitalise on that prominence, an ambitious move for the leader of a small, non-Arabic speaking Russian region.

He has tried to present the mobilisation as something backed across Chechen society, with schoolteachers ordered to make lists of people with space in their homes to "shelter refugees", and claims that some government employees would forego a month's salary because they "donated it to the war".

For Putin, the Chechen leader offers experienced fighters, honed in vicious wars of attrition against insurgency and in street-to-street fighting which is already ripping apart several Ukrainian cities. Their reputation for brutality is a weapon in itself.

“Kadyrov has long experience of so-called ‘cleansing operations’ [against civilians], and his fighters may be used as psychological tool against peaceful Ukrainians,” said Aleksandre Kvakhadze, a research fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the north Caucasus.

“The implicit threat is there: if you don’t surrender, you may meet the same fate as peaceful cities in Georgia and Chechnya.

“Also, the older generation of Chechen fighters participated at some point in defence of Grozny, when they were fighting against Russia. So Russian commanders believe in this sense his forces have skills that may be useful in Ukraine, especially during things like the siege of Mariupol.”

Kadyrov, who runs Chechnya as a personal fiefdom through fear and violence, may even offer inspiration in dictatorship to the Russian leader, as the economy crumbles under sanctions and Putin moves ever deeper into autocracy.

He has traditionally offered the Kremlin a kind of alternative enforcement network, for intelligence gathering and taking out enemies too toxic or controversial for regular spy services.

Perhaps most prominently, five Chechens were found guilty of the 2015 murder of Boris Nemtsov, a leading opposition figure, although the crime was never directly tied to Kadyrov.

As the Kremlin seeks scapegoats for failures in Ukraine, with the FSB chief for the country reportedly under house arrest, these roles as enforcers and in intelligence gathering may prove even more useful, particularly as there has been historical enmity between the two camps.

Many Chechens felt they were sent as cannon fodder to a badly planned war in the early days, when their heavy losses included a senior commander. Now they seem more focused on a media war, aimed at driving recruits and bolstering their leader.

At home, Kadyrov has been pushing hard for “volunteers”, who are offered a sign-on bonus of about \$2,300 (£1,750) and pay of \$1,000 a month, with extra for successful operations, one recruiter said in text messages to a prospective young fighter.

They have approached groups including martial arts coaches asking young men to sign up, but Chechens are apparently mostly unmoved, aware how lethal the war has become.

“The footage and metadata show most [Chechen] forces are at least 20km [12 miles] away from the frontline, the only things they do is record videos to motivate people inside Chechnya and promote the warrior image of Kadyrov and his forces,” Kvakhadze said.

“They are putting in a lot of effort to mobilise ‘volunteers’, offered very generous financial reward for participating, but Telegram and leaks suggest it is not successful.”

Kadyrov also has one other reason to fight. Lined up with the Ukrainian forces are at least two brigades that include members of the Chechen diaspora who loathe him, and would like to see him overthrown. He needs to show enemies at home and abroad his strength, but he needs to keep his forces intact to prop up his brutal rule.

“Kadyrov seems to have been shocked by the scope of Ukrainian resistance, and it seems that dozens if not hundreds of his people have been killed. He has a lot of people, around 12,000, but to stay in power he needs those fighters,” Aslan said.

	<p>“If they suffer too much serious damage in Ukraine, this could backfire for Kadyrov. This might explain some of the rumours he rolled back some of his forces.</p> <p>“He wants to show himself as a tough leader of these tough fighters who are willing to self-sacrifice. But I’m not really sure if they are willing to give up their lives.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Tracker: \$17B global assets tied to Putin
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/global-assets-russians-alleged-ties-putin-wealth-oligarchs-navalny
GIST	<p>More than \$17bn (£13bn) of global assets – including offshore bank accounts, yachts, private jets and luxury properties in London, Tuscany and the French Riviera – have been linked to 35 oligarchs and Russian officials alleged to have close ties to Vladimir Putin.</p> <p>Today, the Guardian, working in a partnership with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and other international news organisations, is unveiling the initial research in an ongoing project to track the wealth of Russia’s most powerful operators.</p> <p>The Russian asset tracker project will start by focusing on a list of 35 men and women named last year as Putin’s alleged enablers by the jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny. It will record assets outside Russia where the reporting partners have seen evidence connecting them to these individuals.</p> <p>Navalny’s organisation wrote to western governments requesting the names on its list be considered for sanctions and all but one have since been blacklisted by either the US, EU, UK or Canada.</p> <p>The names include four of the wealthiest oligarchs, plus heads of state-controlled companies, prominent broadcasters, spy agency chiefs, ministers, political advisers and regional governors. They have been read out in the US Congress by lawmakers seeking tougher penalties for the Russian elite and in the UK parliament by the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesperson, Layla Moran.</p> <p>Moran told the Commons: “Putin’s cronies must be subject to the strongest possible sanctions now, because it is through them that Putin and his inner circle keep their wealth. If we go after his associates, we go after him. Actually, we are rather uniquely placed to do so, because they choose London. They live here: it is ‘Londongrad’ to them.”</p> <p>The Russian asset tracker has identified UK properties or plots of land – collectively worth more than half a billion dollars – that are linked through companies, trusts or relatives to four leading figures on Navalny’s list: Roman Abramovich, Alisher Usmanov, Oleg Deripaska and Igor Shuvalov. The Guardian will report on these findings over the coming days.</p> <p>The research so far has seen evidence, most of it dating from 2020 to the present, of the names being connected to more than 145 assets consisting of 35 mansions, 43 apartments and 27 other pieces of real estate. Seven yachts, plus 11 private jets and helicopters, worth a combined \$2bn, have been identified as linked to just six individuals.</p> <p>Some of the assets in the tracker are in the public domain – including Deripaska’s Belgrave Square mansion in central London, which was taken over by squatters last week, as well as the Dilbar, Lena and Amore Vero superyachts, linked to the oligarchs Usmanov, Gennady Timchenko and Igor Sechin respectively.</p> <p>Other possessions have gone largely unnoticed, or sometimes existed in almost total secrecy. Last month, the US Treasury highlighted the problems of opaque ownership by stating: “Sanctioned oligarchs and powerful Russian elites have used family members to move assets and to conceal their immense wealth.”</p> <p>Outside the UK, the Russian asset tracker has uncovered:</p>

- Twenty-six assets apparently connected to Deripaska, who is [said to be Putin's favourite industrialist](#). They include billions of dollars in shares, a hotel in the Austrian Alps, a superyacht, a 60-metre support vessel with helipad and luxury properties in London, Paris, Washington DC and New York, and four villas in Sardinia.
- Two private jets – a \$65m Gulfstream G650 and a Bombardier Global Express – connected to Shuvalov, Russia's former first deputy prime minister and now chairman of the state development corporation. Shuvalov is also linked to three luxury properties collectively worth about \$35m located in Salzkammergut, Austria, Tuscany in Italy, and Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
- Property holding companies linked to the families of Nikolay Tokarev, the chairman of the state-controlled pipeline company Transneft, as well as the presidential press secretary, Dmitry Peskov. The Tokarev companies appear to own luxury properties on the Croatian island of Lošinj, a known hotspot for rich Russians, while the Peskov firm is connected to an expensive Paris apartment.

Many of the less well-known assets are held via shell companies based in offshore secrecy jurisdictions and trust funds, making them harder to track. Others are owned by relatives or associates of those on the Navalny list, raising questions about the source of funds used to acquire those assets.

They have been checked using proofs ranging from publicly available sources, data from the [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists' offshore leaks databases](#), the [FinCEN files](#) of reports of suspicious banking transactions and human intelligence sources.

The tracker serves as a snapshot in time, and includes assets only where reporters have seen documentary evidence or other reliable information linking them to the Navalny 35. Some possessions linked widely to certain oligarchs have yet to be confirmed.

Abramovich, Tokarev, Peskov and Shuvalov have yet to respond to requests for comment.

A spokesperson for Deripaska, said: "It is unclear how publishing this kind of 'asset inventory' might serve the public interest. Unless, of course, by 'public interest' you mean encouraging squatters to occupy private property, like they did with a London house belonging to Mr Deripaska's relatives.

"All of the property and assets that he owns were acquired by fair means. The ongoing media frenzy, regrettable as it is, certainly doesn't give anyone the right to call Mr Deripaska a kleptocrat. The Russia witch-hunt of which Mr Deripaska has become a victim is driven entirely by political motives."

A spokesperson for Usmanov added: "The entirety of Mr Usmanov's capital was built through successful, sometimes risky, investments, as well as through the effective management of his assets, which is the essence of business. Therefore, to characterise the source of his money as 'non-transparent' is inherently incorrect and damages Mr Usmanov's reputation as an honest entrepreneur and philanthropist."

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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia attack blasts away a shopping mall
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/in-the-ruins-of-retroville-blast-rips-new-district-to-shreds-as-war-closes-in-on-kyiv
GIST	<p>The six corpses lie in a row beneath an awning plastered with advertising company logos. Their bare feet stick out from under a black plastic groundsheet.</p> <p>Two of the bodies are dirty with blood-caked earth, horribly twisted and half naked, a sign the victims were caught in their sleep.</p> <p>On Sunday night, the brand new Retroville shopping centre on the north-western outskirts of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, was hit by a Russian airstrike. At least eight people died, according to the first official toll.</p>

The attack, most probably a missile strike, ripped through the southern section of the vast mall at about 10:45pm, shaking the entire city.

“I was just minding my business at home,” said local man Vladimir. “My apartment shook with the force of the blast. I thought the building would collapse,” he recalls.

Opened in early 2020, just before Covid struck, the Retroville was the pride of the locals – a temple to retail therapy boasting 250 shops, western brands, a multiplex cinema and 3,000 parking places.

This area of the suburb of Vinogradar used to be all market gardens and vineyards. Now ultra-modern grey tower blocks have sprung up everywhere. Some are still vacant. Others aren’t even finished yet.

Around the shattered shopping centre, hardly a single window has survived the blast. Shards of broken glass litter the paving stones at the foot of the 20-storey tenement blocks.

The car park on the south side of the shopping centre is a wreck of mangled cars, twisted metal and treacherously sharp debris.

The Sportlife fitness centre and swimming pool, built over the car park, have been reduced to a tangle of steel and filthy puddles. Lumps of polystyrene insulation, disfigured by the blaze, float in the murky water.

A handful of firefighters and soldiers trawls through the smoking wreckage of a 10-story building searching for more victims.

“That was where the shopping centre offices were,” says a local, nodding towards the concrete shell of the edifice. “Luckily there was no one in there at the time.”

Everyone surveying the desolate scene agrees that the attack on the Retroville is the most powerful to have hit Kyiv since the start of the Russian invasion.

Inside the devastated shopping mall, the once shiny floor is flooded with water from burst pipes and the airy ceiling is hanging in chunks from its frame. From the bowels of the complex, a security alarm is still ringing inside a western DIY store.

An Orthodox priest in a kakhi-coloured cassock tries to pick his way through the rubble, muttering prayers and insults to the “Russian terrorists”. A soldier with a black scarf over his face approaches. “There are bits of body over there,” he whispers to the priest.

Constantin, 22, was there when the explosion happened.

“It blew everything sky high. I don’t know if it was a missile or a massive rocket. It landed right on the gym club.”

The six bodies stretched out under the plastic groundsheet are all dressed in military fatigues. They could have been soldiers catching up on some sleep.

The remains of a huge engine block nearby, surrounded by serrated sheets of tank chassis, lends credence to that theory.

As advancing Russian forces tighten their grip on Kyiv, it has become almost commonplace to come across camouflage vehicles, military hardware and anti-aircraft guns hidden in underground public car parks.

Locals acknowledge the Ukrainian army is using their area as a base. Russian troops are just a few kilometres (miles) away in Irpin, which they have pummelled out of recognition, and residents awake this Monday morning to the boom of cannon fire.

	<p>Then the wail of sirens ripples out across the capital.</p> <p>“It’s the biggest bomb to have hit the city until now,” says Dima Stepanienko. The 30-year-old says he was “flung to the foot of the bed” by the blast that destroyed the Retroville. “I’m scared,” he says, looking away.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Day 27 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-27-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged direct talks with Vladimir Putin, saying: “Without this meeting it is impossible to fully understand what they are ready for in order to stop the war.” He also said his country will never bow to ultimatums from Russia and cities directly under attack, including the capital, Kyiv, and Mariupol and Kharkiv would not accept Russian occupation. • Russian accusations that Kyiv has biological and chemical weapons are false and illustrate that Vladimir Putin is considering using them himself, US President Joe Biden said. “[Putin’s] back is against the wall and now he’s talking about new false flags,” he said. The Pentagon has accused Russian forces of committing war crimes in Ukraine, saying there is “clear evidence” of such, and the spokesman of the US Defence Department said it would help gather evidence of them. • The Ukrainian military claimed on Tuesday that Russian forces have stockpiles of ammunition and food that will last for “no more than three days”. Officials said the situation was similar with fuel. It also claimed about 300 Russia servicemen refused to carry out orders in the Okhtyrka district of the Sumy region. These claims have not been independently verified. • Josep Borrell, the EU’s foreign affairs chief, has heralded new plans to develop an “EU Rapid Deployment Capacity” that could allow the bloc to “swiftly deploy up to 5,000 troops” for different types of crises. He insisted a “European army” will not be created. • Russia has threatened to cut ties with the US after Joe Biden called Vladimir Putin a war criminal, claiming his comments “put Russian-American relations on the verge of a breach”. • Almost 10,000 Russian soldiers may have already been killed in the war in Ukraine since Russia invaded almost four weeks ago, and more than 16,000 wounded, according to reports of previously-undisclosed figures from the defence ministry in Moscow revealed in a pro-Kremlin tabloid newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda. The paper later released a statement claiming it had been hacked. • British prime minister Boris Johnson is “desperate” to go to Ukraine and has a “real emotional connection” with the Ukrainian people, the Tory party chair has claimed. It was reported at the weekend that Johnson wanted to go to Kyiv but on Monday No 10 sources indicated this was unlikely to happen. • Some of Chernobyl’s exhausted workers have been permitted to leave the site. They have been on duty for the last three weeks since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, fuelling concerns about the site’s safety. • The UK defence attaché has said Russia’s claims that it fired “hypersonic” missiles in western Ukraine is probably an effort to detract from the lack of progress in its ground campaign. • A 96-year-old man who survived a string of Nazi concentration camps including Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen was killed by an explosion during the Russian assault on the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, a spokesperson for the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial foundation confirmed.
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HEADLINE	03/21 Workers strike at Calif. Chevron refinery
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/21/chevron-strike-california-workers-walk-out-refinery
GIST	Hundreds of Chevron workers in California went on strike Monday after the company and the United Steelworkers union failed to reach a contract agreement.

More than 500 workers at a refinery producing gasoline, diesel and jet fuel and lubricating oils in the San Francisco Bay Area city of Richmond began striking at 12.01am, the union said in an email. Workers recently voted down a contract offer from Chevron, and the company refused to return to the bargaining table.

Refinery operations will continue as normal, Chevron said. But if the strike were to halt operations at the refinery, that could negatively affect fuel prices in California, which already has the highest gas prices in the US at \$5.86 a gallon, according to the American Automobile Association.

“It would be coming at a very unfortunate time because we already have a shortage of refinery capacity in California right now, and so losing even one or two percent of the state’s refinery capacity would probably result in a noticeable increase in gasoline prices,” Severin Borenstein, a UC Berkeley professor, told KTVU.

Gas prices in the Golden State have continued to rise, even as they’ve started to fall elsewhere in the US. Lawmakers are calling for a \$400 rebate for every taxpayer to help alleviate the burden of high prices at the pumps.

Chevron, which is based in San Ramon, California, has said it does not expect the strike to cause any supply chain issues and told KTVU it would bring in trained workers to replace those on strike.

In a statement on Sunday, Chevron said it has negotiated with the union for months, and believes the contract it offered was fair and addressed union concerns.

The union said it had negotiated a national agreement for oil workers on wages and working conditions, but about 200 individual bargaining units still had to negotiate local issues.

USW Local 5 representative B.K. White, a refinery operator who has worked for the company for 29 years, said Chevron failed to address worker fatigue and a lack of staffing.

“If we had more people and could get a better pay rate, maybe our members wouldn’t feel obligated to come in and work as many as 70 hours a week to make ends meet. We don’t believe that is safe,” White said.

Chevron said that in Richmond, “the union’s demands exceeded what the company believes to be reasonable and moved beyond what was agreed to as part of the national pattern bargaining agreement.”

The old contract with Chevron in Richmond expired 1 February and workers had been reporting to their jobs on a rolling 24-hour extension, the union said.

The company offered a 2.5% pay increase, but the union had asked for 5% to keep up with inflation and cost of living in the Bay Area, White said.

“It’s rough for the blue-collar worker in the Bay Area, and we asked for a 5% bump to help us out a little bit with our medical at Kaiser, which went up 23% last year,” White said.

White said the company has already brought in about 100 replacement workers who are not trained to run the plants.

“This is at the detriment of the city of Richmond and the environment,” he said.

The company said it brought in qualified replacements starting with Sunday’s night shift.

“The employees who are operating the refinery during the strike have satisfied the necessary requirements to perform their designated jobs (including receiving on-the-job training from

experienced employees/operators) so that the refinery will be operated safely and in compliance with all applicable laws,” Chevron spokesperson Tyler Kruzich said in an email.

If the strike were to shut down the refinery, that could negatively affect gasoline prices in California – which has the highest regular gas price in the nation at \$5.86 per gallon, according to the American Automobile Association.

However, Ken Medlock, director of the Center for Energy Studies at Rice University’s Baker Institute, said it is highly unlikely the strike would lead Chevron to shut down operations or raise prices.

“It is more likely that the refinery will run with a skeleton crew’ until the labor contract issues can be resolved,” Medlock said in an email.

“California prices are already higher than other states due to the unique blend that must be sold in the state that limits arbitrage of imported gasoline from other regions, so there is ample incentive to keep the refinery running,” he added.

The old contract with Chevron in Richmond expired Feb. 1, and workers had been reporting to their jobs on a rolling 24-hour extension, the union said.

The San Ramon, California-based Chevron said on its website that the refinery employs 1,300 workers. The union represents about 600 employees who include machinists, pipefitters, lab technicians and warehouse workers, White said.

The refinery is one of largest in the state and processes about 240,000 barrels of crude oil a day to make gasoline, diesel and jet fuel and lubricating oils, products that are sold mainly in California.

Chevron said in a statement it is “fully prepared to continue normal operations” despite the strike.

“We anticipate no issues in maintaining a reliable supply of products to the market,” it said.

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HEADLINE	03/22 China locks down 9M; reports 4,000 cases
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/china-locks-down-city-of-9-million-and-reports-4000-cases-as-omicron-tests-zero-covid-strategy
GIST	<p>China has locked down an industrial city of 9 million people overnight and reported more than 4,000 virus cases, as the nation’s “zero-Covid” strategy is confronted by an Omicron wave.</p> <p>Health authorities reported 4,770 new infections across the country on Tuesday, the bulk in the north-eastern province of Jilin, as the city of Shenyang in neighbouring Liaoning province was ordered to lock down late Monday.</p> <p>China has moved fast in recent weeks to snuff out virus clusters with a pick-and-mix of hyper-local lockdowns, mass testing and citywide closures. It reported two Covid-19 deaths on Saturday, the first in over a year.</p> <p>Authorities have warned of the risk posed to growth by persistent lockdowns as the country strives to balance the health crisis with the needs of the world’s second biggest economy.</p> <p>Shenyang, an industrial base home to factories including carmaker BMW, reported 47 new cases Tuesday as authorities put all housing compounds under “closed management” and barred residents from leaving without a 48-hour negative test result.</p> <p>Last week Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed the need to “minimise the impact” of the pandemic on China’s economy, but also urged officials to “stick to” the current zero-Covid approach.</p>

	<p>But Beijing's virus playbook has been stretched to the limit by the latest Omicron surge, which has forced authorities to free up hospital beds from mild-symptom patients.</p> <p>Some cities such as Shanghai have avoided a full lockdown and instead imposed a web of individual building lockdowns, even as new daily asymptomatic infections there spiral into the hundreds.</p> <p>Jilin provincial officials announced on Monday that the first 10,000 doses of Pfizer's oral Covid drug arrived on Sunday, marking the first time Paxlovid has been used in China.</p> <p>The province last week imposed strict travel curbs banning locals from leaving their cities and counties, while several cities have already confined residents at home.</p> <p>The southern tech powerhouse of Shenzhen on Monday announced it would lift its week-long lockdown "in an orderly manner", after having partially eased measures on Friday to minimise the impact of virus shutdowns on factories and ports.</p> <p>Health officials last week revealed only around half of Chinese aged over 80 have been double-vaccinated, as the spectre of Hong Kong's dire Covid mortality rates – mainly among the unvaccinated elderly – hangs over Beijing's decision making.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Pakistan PM warns MPs ahead of vote
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/no-one-will-marry-your-children-pakistan-pm-warns-ahead-of-vote
GIST	<p>With a vote of no-confidence looming over his government, Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, warned those planning to vote against him that they risk social disgrace, and that "no one will marry your children".</p> <p>The no-confidence vote is expected to be tabled on Friday 25 March, backed by a coalition of politicians who accuse Khan of bad governance and economic incompetence. In January inflation reached 13% and the cost of fuel and food rocketed.</p> <p>The opposition party claims that it has the support of more than 20 lawmakers of Khan's Tehreek-i-Insaf party (PTI) and its allies. Khan also appeared to have lost the backing of the military establishment credited with bringing him to power. The votes would be enough to oust him.</p> <p>Talking to a public rally on Sunday in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Khan told party members who planned to vote against him: "Your children and families would lose respect and honour in society. No one will marry your children. People will neither trust you nor respect you. Masses are aware of the situation and what is happening in the country. This is the age of social media. It's difficult to hide anything from them."</p> <p>Khan asked them to change their minds. "I would forgive you like a father, or face disrespect in the society," he warned in his speech.</p> <p>The information minister, Fawad Chaudhry, said more than a million people would gather in front of the parliament on the day of the vote in order to prevent it going ahead.</p> <p>Disruption followed, and a crowd of Khan's supporters gathered outside Sindh House, in Islamabad, where some of the politicians who support the no-confidence were, and the gate was broken.</p> <p>On Monday Karachi police charged two PTI politicians and others with rioting and forcibly entering the residence of politician Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani in the city's Bath Island area.</p>

	<p>Khan and his ministers have accused the opposition parties of horse trading and bribing their politicians. The allegations have been denied by the opposition and disgruntled lawmakers.</p> <p>A PTI politician, Noor Alam Khan, told local media he was “very disappointed to hear the fake allegations against the lawmakers”.</p> <p>Human Rights Watch said it feared violence before the no-confidence vote. The group urged the government and opposition to “deter supporters from violence” amid the threat of political turmoil.</p> <p>On Monday, during a hearing on the issue, the supreme court of Pakistan said members of the national assembly should be allowed to vote for whoever they wanted. The court also directed the government and the opposition to avoid gathering a crowd outside the parliament.</p> <p>The attorney general, representing the government, said he had talked to the prime minister and “there will be no crowd outside the assembly during the session. No [lawmaker] will be stopped by crowds”.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Workplaces in denial? Americans changed
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/mar/21/workplaces-are-in-denial-over-how-much-americans-have-changed
GIST	<p>Nearly six months before Covid-19, the Yale historian Frank Snowden wrote a book about epidemics and pandemics. What he found was that these periods of suffering reshape not just how societies function, but also how humans want to spend their limited time on Earth.</p> <p>“Epidemic diseases reach into the deepest levels of the human psyche,” he said in 2020. “They pose the ultimate questions about death, about mortality: what is life for? What is our relationship with God?”</p> <p>Two years and a pandemic later, Snowden said Covid-19 has challenged another set of beliefs: how America is supposed to work.</p> <p>Before the pandemic, Americans were already working longer hours than people in other developed nations. Perhaps it was in the spirit of the American dream – the idea that if you work hard, this country will make your sacrifices worth it. But mere days into the pandemic, it became harder to hold on to this myth.</p> <p>In the first month of the pandemic, about 22 million jobs were lost. Soon after, 8 million Americans fell into poverty. Millions of people were unsure how they would access healthcare. More than half of Americans lacked the savings to survive three months without a job. When the government sent them checks, it was hardly enough to cover a month of rent.</p> <p>But now America is looking to fully reopen – to get back to “normal” – and a huge part of that is how we return to some version of the in-office 9-to-5 work day. On one hand, companies are acknowledging change: they’re willing to be somewhat flexible with hybrid or remote work, and have signaled that a “transition” will be necessary to adjust to the new normal. But the core of these messages are all the same: <i>where</i> you do work may change, but <i>what</i> you do and <i>why</i> you do it will remain the same.</p> <p>It’s clear that company leaders still want the old version of the all-American work ethic that was dependent on hustle culture and productivity. But I can’t help but wonder whether that’s incompatible with who we’ve become – and, more importantly, the realities of the world in which we live.</p> <p>Many of us have drastically changed. It’s not just our attitudes toward work and life, but also that our bodies are reacting differently to trauma, stress and even love.</p>

Just one month into the pandemic, the rates of people reporting depression symptoms soared. Among those earning less than \$20,000 a year, nearly half [reported](#) depression symptoms – up 30 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels.

That depression and anxiety often stemmed from stress, fear and trauma. While there wasn't a tiger hiding in the bushes, our brains were reacting to real threats. Some of this has [led](#) to a lack of focus and forgetfulness. But research also shows that the brain can be literally reshaped and [rewired](#) when we face these threats. For example, chronic stress can [cause](#) the body to produce too many cells called microglia, which overzealously remove synapses that we still need. That disturbs brain function in places like the amygdala, which is in charge of telling the body when to activate the fight-or-flight response.

Meanwhile, nearly 1 million people died and, in turn, nearly [9 million](#) Americans lost a close family member. We often use the word “grief” to capture the complicated processes that a loss of this magnitude triggers in our brains. But that shouldn't obscure very real ways our brains have had to [process](#) loss – that a person who exists so vibrantly in our minds no longer exists in the physical world.

Oh, and psychologists are even speculating that the pandemic has [messed with our perception of time](#).

“I believe the deepest, longest-lasting legacy of Covid-19 might be on our mental health,” Snowden said. “The world was not prepared for the physical disease; we're totally unprepared for the mental disease that will follow in its wake ... Are we as a society ready to recognise that need?”

The tragedies of the last two years have woken us up from our work-obsessed culture. Many of us have realized it's OK for work to be merely a paycheck – a way to buy enough freedom to spend our time how we'd really like. Perhaps that means taking better care of ourselves or those around us. Others may want more meaning in their work – for the world to be in a slightly better place after we've worked 40 hours. And if America can't support these desires, we've realized that it's not because we're broken; it's because America is.

Ultimately, when workers were [polled](#) how they feel about work, nearly a quarter of Americans said they want a job with “more purpose” and one in five said they want to step back and “focus on their personal lives”.

Compare these experiences with what companies have told their workers in their back-to-office messages.

In October, Amazon [told](#) its [1.1 million](#) US workers that their hybrid in-office schedules should be shaped around maximizing work output. “The decisions should be guided by what will be most effective for our customers; and not surprisingly, we will all continue to be evaluated by how we deliver for customers, regardless of where the work is performed,” the chief executive, Andy Jassy, wrote.

That same month, Walmart sent a [message](#) to its 1.5 million US employees that they would be transitioning back to the office. “I look forward to the halls and conference rooms buzzing with energy,” Walmart's chief people officer, Donna Morris, wrote. “Bottom line: we will focus our energy on serving our customers and members, and supporting our associates – not on where the work is getting done.”

What Morris left out was that most of their employees continued working in retail stores throughout the pandemic, while a [huge number of them](#) relied on public assistance. Walmart brought in a record [\\$573bn](#) in revenue last year.

The number of labor strikes has [risen](#) in the last two years – a clear message that workers aren't happy with the status quo. A record number of workers are [resigning](#) and companies are [having trouble](#) finding new recruits.

This wave of companies trying to resume operations certainly feels like these societal and personal changes are being waved away as merely a phase. But that gets to Snowden's broader critique of

	<p>American institutions, from companies to government: We still want to get back to normal, and we can't acknowledge the realities of our current world.</p> <p>“We ought to recognize that it was normality itself – pre-pandemic normality – that got us into the pandemic,” he said. “A meteorologist can tell you if you live in the Caribbean, a hurricane is in your future. If you don't prepare, you're very unwise. Similarly, virologists can tell you we're going to have more pandemic and epidemic challenges.”</p> <p>This is the part of the story where I say what companies should do; I found this advice from Harvard Business School faculty helpful – things like showing compassion, being honest about the company's need and leading with empathy. But no matter how good a back-to-office plan is, they're all a reminder that we're insistent on building a post-pandemic world that mirrors the pre-pandemic one.</p> <p>In reality, more pandemics could be coming, and workers now know that this current economy is not built for this new world. They know that this current system wiped out their savings within a few months of the country shutting down, and it will do it again.</p> <p>Perhaps it's too much to ask companies to prepare for <i>that</i> future, much less imagine it. It's coming nevertheless.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Australia creates own Space Command
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/world/australia/australia-space-command.html
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia — Two years after the United States inaugurated a military Space Force to mixed reviews, Australia has created its own Space Command to counter threats from China, Russia and other extraterrestrial powers.</p> <p>The new force will expand Australia's space capabilities and contribute to “a larger, collective effort among like-minded countries to ensure a safe, stable and secure space domain,” Peter Dutton, Australia's defense minister, said on Tuesday.</p> <p>In a speech at a conference with several American military officers in attendance, Mr. Dutton also announced that Australia and the United States had agreed to partner on “a broad range of satellite activities.”</p> <p>It is not clear how sizable the command's ranks will be. The announcement came just two months before a federal election in which Australia's conservative governing coalition is trying to make national security a key plank of its pitch to voters.</p> <p>At the same time, the expanded commitment to space defense reflects the reality of a new technological landscape for war, in which satellites are vital tools for navigation, surveillance and attacks from unmanned weapons.</p> <p>The announcement also amounts to yet another sign of deepening Australian-American security ties. The two countries, allies since World War I, have been working more closely together in recent years as China's ambitions and military investment have become a greater concern.</p> <p>In September, Australia announced a new defense agreement in which the United States and Britain will help it deploy nuclear-powered submarines, a major advance in Australian military strength. The partnership, known as AUKUS, also includes plans to collaborate on new military capabilities in artificial intelligence, quantum computing and other next-generation technologies.</p> <p>The space partnership has not been branded as a part of that agreement, but the backdrop — an increasingly contested, multipolar era — remains the same.</p>

“Space is a sector that China has invested in heavily as part of its broader military modernization and efforts for technological advancement,” said Jennifer Jackett, a security researcher focused on technology at the Australian National University. “This reflects the fact that space is a critical domain for both military capability and civil applications.”

Some security analysts said that Australia had recognized, with both Russia and China advancing their ability to damage or destroy satellites, that space vulnerabilities must be managed for Australia’s own security and in the case of an attack on America’s satellite network.

The relative power of the United States compared to China continues to be a concern, with the war in Ukraine leading some to worry that demands in Europe will draw American attention and resources away from Asia, or lead China to challenge the United States more directly.

“There is a growing concern that reliance on large U.S. systems could leave us quite vulnerable if they were to be targeted in a confrontation,” said John Blaxland, a defense expert at the Australian National University. “There is a lot of emphasis on smaller — and greater volume and greater frequency of launching satellites — that are going to be able to give Australia that greater resilience, and redundancy.”

The United States seems determined to prove that its commitment is unwavering. Several senior officials from the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, based in Honolulu, will be in Australia this week, along with senior commanders from the American Space Force. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visited Australia and Fiji last month.

When the Trump administration announced its intention to create a Space Force in 2018, the idea drew an uneven response, including inside the American military, with some questioning its necessity and cost.

But the Biden administration, after taking office last year, said it would not review the decision to create the force, and it has cemented itself as the sixth, and smallest, branch of the U.S. military.

Australia, for its part, is a small player in the global space industry, having created a national civilian space agency only in 2018.

Nonetheless, in his comments on Tuesday, Mr. Dutton emphasized that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had made space, highly technical military strength and traditional alliances all the more important.

“We must remain determined in what we can do to support liberty against the odious forces of tyranny,” he said. “In the Indo-Pacific, Australia is contributing to collective efforts to maintain stability and deter aggression.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 Boeing faces new upheaval after crash
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/business/boeing-china-737.html
GIST	<p>The crash of a Boeing jet in China on Monday is the latest crisis for the American plane manufacturer, raising the prospect of renewed regulatory scrutiny and confronting the company with another catastrophe involving its planes.</p> <p>It could be weeks or even months before investigators identify what caused the Boeing 737-800 NG operated by China Eastern Airlines to plunge from the sky with more than 130 people aboard. But the outcome of the investigation could weigh heavily on Boeing, which recently overcame years of troubles involving a newer variant of the single-aisle 737, the Max, and has had long delays in producing and delivering the twin-aisle 787 Dreamliner.</p> <p>“I think it’s going to be very important to see what actually happened with this particular incident because there’s a credibility concern,” said Rob Spingarn, a managing director at Melius Research, a financial</p>

analysis firm. “I think the investment community will pause to some extent on Boeing until that information is out.”

Thousands of 737-800 NG planes have safely traversed the globe in recent decades, and many industry analysts and experts were disinclined to conclude that Monday’s crash indicated any fundamental design flaw. But Boeing’s stock fell 3.6 percent nonetheless. Shares of China Eastern ended 6.5 percent lower in trading in Hong Kong.

An icon of the aviation age, Boeing is the largest manufacturing exporter in the United States, a blue chip stock and a major employer. It is also one of the federal government’s biggest contractors.

Last year was its best for sales since 2018, with net orders of 535 planes. But it has endured repeated setbacks, including a \$3.5 billion charge in the final three months of 2021 from the Dreamliner delays, driving the company to a \$4.2 billion loss for the quarter.

In addition to its difficulties with the Max and the Dreamliner, two flagship planes, Boeing has had to contend with an industry slowdown resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. With air travel recovering only slowly to 2019 levels, airlines have cut back plans to buy new planes.

Boeing’s recent problems began with the Max, which was widely criticized after one of the planes crashed in Indonesia in late 2018 and a second crashed in Ethiopia in March 2019. All 346 people aboard the planes were killed, and the Max was grounded worldwide after the second crash.

Those disasters brought regulatory rebukes, several lawsuits, and billions of dollars in fines, settlements and lost orders. The United States approved the Max for flight again in late 2020, requiring Boeing to make certain changes to the plane. That prompted similar approval from other countries, but regulators in China granted approval only in early December.

Industry analysts had expected the plane to resume flying there in the coming months. But its return could become intertwined with the investigation into the crash of the 737-800 NG, analysts said, with Chinese government officials hesitant to bring back the Max as they investigate a crash involving its predecessor.

The Max crashes were directly tied to flight-control software known as MCAS, which the Max is the only commercial airliner to use. That system was introduced to the Max to account for changes made when the plane was upgraded from the NG, or Next Generation, line.

On Monday, Boeing said that it was in touch with China Eastern Airlines and with the National Transportation Safety Board, the agency leading U.S. efforts in assisting China’s investigation into the crash.

The safety board said that it had appointed a senior investigator as the representative to the investigation and that Boeing, the manufacturer of the plane’s engines and the Federal Aviation Administration would contribute technical expertise. Boeing also said that its technical experts were “prepared to assist” China’s aviation authority, the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

The Boeing 737-800 NG is a workhorse of the skies. Boeing delivered nearly 5,000 of the planes between 1998 and 2020, far more than any of the other commercial planes it sells, according to Boeing data. Along with the Max, it holds special appeal for airlines because of its passenger capacity and travel range. Single-aisle planes are typically used for domestic flights, though some airlines use them for shorter international trips.

For Boeing and its 737 family, China is an important market. Of the 25,000 passenger planes in service worldwide, about 17 percent are Boeing 737-800 NGs, according to Cirium, an aviation data firm. China is home to nearly 1,200, followed by Europe, with nearly 1,000, and the United States, with nearly 800. In the United States, American Airlines has 265 in service, while Southwest Airlines has 205, United Airlines has 136 and Delta Air Lines has 77, according to Cirium.

China is also the second-largest market for Boeing planes, after the United States. Last year, the company forecast that the number of commercial planes in China would double by 2040, with airlines there needing 8,700 new aircraft by then, valued at about \$1.47 trillion.

The country is perhaps even more crucial for Boeing's leading rival, Airbus. Last year, Airbus delivered 142 commercial aircraft to China, its largest single-country market, representing a quarter of its production.

Airbus has a mammoth assembly line in Tianjin, China, producing A320 single-aisle planes and A330 wide-body passenger jets. It also has relationships with Chinese airlines and helicopter operators, and many components in Airbus jets are made by Chinese companies. The value of industrial cooperation between Airbus and China was \$900 million in 2018, up from \$500 million in 2015, according to Airbus.

But as important as China is, Boeing's relationship with the country can be complicated. When tensions rise between China and the United States — as they did during former President Donald J. Trump's trade war — Boeing can find itself at a disadvantage.

"As someone once said, they've always been the designated hostage in any kind of U.S.-China geopolitical standoff," said Richard Aboulafia, a managing director at AeroDynamic Advisory, an aviation consulting firm.

In addition, as China's economy cools, so, too, could its expanding travel sector, testing Boeing's reliance on the country.

And then there is the Comac C919, China's homegrown competitor to the 737. The plane is set to debut this year and poses a long-term threat to Boeing and Airbus in China. But analysts widely expect it could be years before China refines the plane, begins large-scale production and supports its domestic growth with readily available parts and maintenance.

"All of these things take time to develop," said Mr. Spingarn of Melius Research. "That's why you don't have more aircraft manufacturers."

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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia pounds Ukraine cities
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/world/europe/kyiv-mariupol-bombed.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Strikes on cities across Ukraine left a patchwork of death and destruction on Monday, including one that blasted a once-bustling shopping mall in Kyiv into a smoldering ruin with one of the most powerful explosions to hit the city since Russia's war on Ukraine began.</p> <p>In the besieged and ravaged southern port of Mariupol, residents braced for renewed attacks after the Ukrainian government rejected a Russian ultimatum to surrender the city.</p> <p>"A neighbor said that God left Mariupol. He was afraid of everything he saw," said Nadezhda Sukhorukova, a resident who recently escaped, adding, "my city is dying a painful death."</p> <p>The violence formed a backdrop to new consultations between the United States and its allies over how to ratchet up the pressure on Russia, with President Biden speaking by telephone with the leaders of Germany, Italy, France and Britain before heading to Brussels on Wednesday to meet NATO leaders. The alliance may take up Poland's proposal to create an international peacekeeping force for Ukraine, an idea U.S. officials cast doubt on.</p> <p>In Moscow, Russia's foreign ministry summoned the U.S. ambassador, John J. Sullivan, on Monday to warn that Mr. Biden's recent statements — last week he called President Vladimir V. Putin a "murderous dictator" and a "pure thug" — had put "Russian-American relations on the verge of</p>

breaking.” And in Washington, Mr. Biden urged the private sector to harden digital defenses, in light of intelligence that Russia might launch cyberattacks.

The fiery destruction of the sprawling mall in Kyiv, the capital, was the most dramatic example on Monday of Russian forces aiming artillery, rockets and bombs at civilian as well as military targets, after failing to quickly seize control of Ukraine’s major cities following the Feb. 24 invasion.

The British defense intelligence agency said on Monday that the bulk of Russian forces were more than 15 miles from the center of Kyiv and that taking the capital remained “Russia’s primary military objective.”

Given that the Ukrainians have managed to push the Russian forces back in places, frustrating that objective, Russia was resorting to long-range missiles and other weapons to bombard cities and towns, taking a growing toll in physical devastation and civilian casualties.

The Ukrainian government also accused the Russians of targeting civilians in other ways, including hijacking a desperately needed aid convoy near Kharkiv and forcibly transferring thousands of children to Russia.

Ukraine’s foreign ministry said the children had been relocated from the eastern Donbas region, where the two sides have been fighting for control over two separatist areas since 2014. Oleg Nikolenko, the ministry’s spokesman, said in a statement that 2,389 children were taken from their parents on a single day, March 19. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

In Kharkiv, the victims of Russian shelling included Boris Romantschenko, 96, who had survived the Nazi concentration camps of Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and Mittelbau-Dora. He died on Friday when a projectile hit his apartment building, the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorial Foundation said on Monday.

In the southern city of Kherson, Russian forces that have held the city since March 2 responded with violence on Monday to protesters in the main square who shouted at them to leave, according to videos and photographs verified by The New York Times. The troops’ previous response to regular protests had been sporadic gunfire in the air, but that changed to sustained gunfire for nearly a minute, shooting directly at the crowd — which scattered — and the use of flash-bang type grenades.

In Kyiv, city officials said at least eight people were killed after a Russian missile hit the mall called Retroville, in the northern part of the city, around midnight. The toll was expected to rise. The blast was so powerful that it blew debris hundreds of yards in every direction, shook buildings and flattened one part of the mall, a sporting goods store called Sport City.

Roughly eight hours after the strike, firefighters were still battling pockets of flames while soldiers and emergency crews searched the rubble. Six bodies covered with plastic lay on the pavement beside one of the mall’s sliding glass entry doors.

Closer to the crater left by the explosion, the damage was too extensive to recognize much beyond mangled metal, concrete and smoldering car engines blown out of ruined vehicles. One fireman told another that deeper in the debris he had found “a hand, a leg and other bits.”

The Retroville mall hosted a multiplex movie theater, a fitness club and fast food restaurants like McDonald’s and KFC, and an H&M outlet, although it had been closed since the start of the war. An office building next door was still standing, but all its windows were shattered and it had ignited.

A soldier at the scene said a unit of volunteers in the Territorial Defense Forces had been quartering at the mall, and that some had died along with security guards.

While Kyiv has been under bombardment for weeks, the scope of the devastation around the mall was greater than anything The Times has witnessed inside the city limits.

Roksana Tsarenko, 27, an accountant, stood by the edge of the debris field, surveying the mayhem. She had last been inside the mall a month ago to watch “Marry Me,” starring Jennifer Lopez. “You are living an ordinary life, and then, all at once, life isn’t normal anymore,” she said.

Now all of Kyiv is involved in the defense of the capital, a once-thriving metropolis turned into a fortress.

Elsewhere in the city, Oleg Sentsov, a filmmaker who was imprisoned for years in Russia due to his opposition to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, said he had evacuated his family and then joined the territorial defense, already fighting in the suburbs of Kyiv.

“The Ukrainian people have been reborn,” said Mr. Sentsov, dressed in camouflage fatigues.

“Of course the war is terrible,” he added, “and many people are dying, but there is a feeling that our nation is being born and our connections to Russia are being cut.”

Russia had set a deadline of dawn on Monday for the surrender of Ukrainian soldiers defending the strategic southern port of Mariupol, the main city that lies between the eastern portions of Ukraine controlled by Moscow and the Crimean peninsula that Russia occupied in 2014.

The city has been cut off from water, electricity and communications, and the fierce fighting has made it almost impossible to escape. The city is less than 40 miles from the Russian border, and any effort to create an unbroken land bridge stretching from Russia to Crimea would hinge on controlling Mariupol.

A Ukrainian official accused Russian forces of firing on buses evacuating women and children from the city. Four children were injured, including one seriously, Oleksandr Staruch, the head of the Zaporizhzhia Regional State Administration, said on Monday.

Russia has repeatedly denied hitting civilian targets, even in the face of mounting evidence of homes, offices and other structures being leveled. An air strike last week destroyed a theater in Mariupol and one on Sunday hit a school in the city; each had been used to shelter hundreds of civilians.

In a rare firsthand account, Ms. Sukhorukova, a Mariupol resident who managed to escape, described what she called a living “hell” with terrifying attacks at night — the almost constant roar of planes and sounds of explosions overhead as she sat in darkness underground.

“The dead lie in the entrances, on the balconies, in the yards. And you’re not scared one bit,” Ms. Sukhorukova wrote on Facebook in a series of posts after she escaped late last week. “Because the biggest fear is night shelling. Do you know what night shelling looks like? Like death.”

There have been few first-person accounts of what the estimated 300,000 people trapped in the city have endured. The only international journalists who had remained were a team from The Associated Press, but they said on Monday they were forced to flee after learning that Russian troops were searching for them.

The blasts sounded like “a huge hammer is pounding on the iron roof and then a terrible rattle, as if the ground was cut with a huge knife, or a huge iron giant walks in forged boots on your land and steps on houses, trees, people,” Ms. Sukhorukova said.

Venturing out onto the streets looking for water, her hair matted from days without bathing, she said she dreamed of two things: “not to get shot and to take a hot shower before I die.”

	<p>It is not clear how Poland's plan for a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine might work, given repeated statements by the United States and NATO officials that they would not send troops to defend Ukraine. In the past such missions were only deployed after the fighting had ended.</p> <p>On Thursday, Mr. Biden will join a European Council summit meeting and a G7 meeting called by Germany to discuss further sanctions against Mr. Putin, as well as aid for the more than three million people who have fled Ukraine.</p> <p>On Friday, he will visit Poland, a NATO member that borders Ukraine and Russia and the country that is the main destination for refugees. Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said there are no plans for Mr. Biden to travel to Ukraine.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Vaccination rates stall; Covid surge next?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/21/world/covid-19-mandates-cases-vaccine?name=stylncoronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline_live_updates_block_recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#vaccination-rates-covid-cases
GIST	<p>When the Covid vaccine first became widely available a year ago, it was a hopeful time, with demand exceeding capacity and millions of Americans jockeying for the nearest appointment slot. But, as of Monday, about a quarter of eligible adults were still not fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Since last summer, the U.S. inoculation campaign has sputtered, undermined by vaccine skepticism, partisan politics and misinformation. And warnings of another potential surge, fueled by the new Omicron subvariant, BA.2, may have little impact on vaccination rates.</p> <p>"It is very much slow gains from here on out," said Rupali Limaye, an associate scientist who studies vaccine messaging at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.</p> <p>Rates for boosters are even further behind. Omicron's emergence in late fall pushed federal regulators to expand booster eligibility, and some Americans rushed to get the additional dose.</p> <p>But the booster campaign has stalled, with about half of eligible U.S. adults still not boosted as of Monday, according to the C.D.C. People may be even less motivated now than before, as masks come off, restrictions are lifted, and the public shifts toward treating the coronavirus as a part of daily life.</p> <p>"People messaging on behalf of public health agencies need to be more strategic," said Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, a professor of global health and infectious diseases at Stanford University.</p> <p>She said that there have been too many mixed messages since vaccines became widely available. Public health communicators, she said, need to be more clear: that inoculations can save lives and can help prevent severe disease even in young people.</p> <p>Public health agencies are also grappling with uncertainty around funding, with Congress has yet to approve billions of dollars in new emergency Covid aid. Previous aid packages passed without strings attached, but now most Republicans in Congress say they will not approve another aid package unless the White House finds a way to pay for it.</p> <p>That could stall efforts to help the Biden administration pay for vaccines, buy Covid treatments and reimburse doctors who care for uninsured Covid patients, among other services.</p> <p>"The challenges with funding being cut is we need to be sure we have the tools in place to address any future surge," said Joseph Allen, a professor and the director of the healthy buildings program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.</p>

Experts said there should be renewed urgency for people to get vaccinated now as the United States braces for another potential surge, driven by BA.2, which is sweeping through some European countries. Scientists say it does not appear to cause more severe disease than the Omicron subvariant BA.1.

In the United States, BA.2 accounted for 23 percent of new cases from March 6 to March 12, according to the [C.D.C.](#)

“The booster and vaccine is a path back for the country regardless of what happens next with BA.2,” Dr. Allen said.

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HEADLINE	03/22 Texas damaging winds; Southeast storms
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/us/severe-weather-forecast-tornadoes.html
GIST	<p>A storm system capable of producing floods, isolated tornadoes and hailstones the size of Ping-Pong balls was moving eastward across Texas on Tuesday morning, hours after high winds from the system damaged homes, downed trees and ripped a roof off a high school.</p> <p>Several tornadoes roared through Central Texas beginning in the late afternoon on Monday. Tornadic winds in and around Austin, the state capital, overturned an 18-wheeler. In Elgin, about 25 miles east of the city, a mobile home was tossed onto the top of a building.</p> <p>Images of destroyed homes, broken trees and streets littered with debris in Jacksboro, about 90 miles northwest of Dallas, circulated widely on social media.</p> <p>As of early Tuesday, there were torrential rains in the Austin area, and a flash-flood warning there was in effect until 3:45 a.m. About 50,000 customers across Texas, mostly in the northeastern part of the state, were without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us, a website that aggregates data from utilities across the United States.</p> <p>Tornado watches were in effect until 8 a.m. for swaths of Texas that included Houston and encompassed a population of more than 7.5 million people. The National Weather Service said that scattered wind gusts up to 75 miles per hour, a couple of tornadoes and isolated hailstorms were possible.</p> <p>Other counties in Texas, southwest Arkansas and northwest Louisiana were under tornado watches until 3 a.m., the Weather Service said.</p> <p>While thunderstorms are common in the region throughout the year, severe weather reaches its peak during March, April and May.</p> <p>As a strong front producing rain and snow over the Rockies moves east by Tuesday, a wave of low pressure will develop over the Southern High Plains, the Weather Service said on Monday. That system will pull moisture northward over the plains and the Mississippi Valley from the Gulf of Mexico. The rolling storms could produce frequent lightning, heavy wind gusts, hail, tornadoes and excessive rainfall that could lead to flash flooding, meteorologists said.</p> <p>Here is a glance at the forecast by region.</p> <p>Stormy weather began on Monday afternoon in Texas.</p> <p>Several homes and structures in central Texas were destroyed by heavy winds on Monday, Gov. Greg Abbott said at an evening news conference about 40 miles north of Austin. No deaths had been reported so far, he said.</p> <p>Judge Bill Gravell, Jr., of Williamson County, who joined the governor at the event, said that several people had been injured while sheltering at home from the storm, but officials did not provide specific numbers.</p>

The storm also knocked down power lines, creating dangerous conditions, the judge said. As a result, he said, electricity in parts of the county would be turned off “in order to protect the first-responders and in order to protect those doing the repairs needed.” He did not say when electricity would be restored.

The winds seriously damaged a school in north-central Texas.

“There’s no roof left,” Starla Sanders, the principal of Jacksboro High School, told the local television station [WFAA](#). The school ended “a little bit early” so that students could get home safely, and no injuries were reported, Ms. Sanders said.

She said she had heard reports that her home had been damaged, too. “I haven’t been out there,” Ms. Sanders added. “The road’s blocked, but that’s what people say — that there’s not much left of my own house.”

Portions of Texas could receive up to four inches of rain through Tuesday evening, with some areas receiving more rain along with possible street flooding, [the Weather Service in Houston said](#).

While there was uncertainty about the timing of the storms and which areas would receive the heaviest rain, meteorologists told residents to prepare.

Storms will move to the Southeast on Tuesday.

As the storms push eastward on Tuesday, [more than two million people](#) in portions of Louisiana and Mississippi could face severe weather. Cities in the path of the storms include Baton Rouge, La., and Jackson, Miss.

The main threat on Tuesday will be tornadoes and damaging winds before and after the storm, [the Weather Service in New Orleans said](#), adding that hail greater than an inch in diameter could develop. Up to three inches of rain is forecast. A tornado outbreak is also likely on Tuesday.

Areas in Mississippi may see winds as strong as 70 miles per hour and hail the size of golf balls, [forecasters said](#).

About three inches of rain is expected in Memphis. Areas to the east, including Georgia, are expected to receive less rain.

Parts of the East Coast will have a slight risk for severe weather beginning Wednesday.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Fed will hike further and faster if necessary
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/21/powell-says-fed-will-hike-further-and-faster-if-ne/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Chair Jerome Powell said Monday that the Federal Reserve would raise its benchmark short-term interest rate faster than expected, and high enough to restrain growth and hiring, if it decides that this would be necessary to slow rampaging inflation.</p> <p>At their meeting last week, Fed officials raised their key rate from near zero to a range of 0.25% to 0.5% and forecast that they would carry out six more quarter-point hikes this year.</p> <p>Powell said that if necessary, the Fed would be open to raising rates by a more aggressive half-point at multiple meetings and to push rates into “restrictive” territory that would limit growth. The Fed hasn’t increased its benchmark rate by a half-point since May 2000.</p> <p>“We will take the necessary steps to ensure a return to price stability,” he said in a speech to an economics conference. “In particular, if we conclude that it is appropriate to move more aggressively by raising the federal funds rate by more than (a quarter-point) at a meeting or meetings, we will do so.”</p>

The Fed is under pressure from widespread criticism that it has reacted too slowly to a price spike that has catapulted inflation to four-decade highs. At their meeting last week, Fed officials forecast that they would raise rates four additional times in 2023 and that inflation would slow to 2.7% by the end of that year.

At the same time, the policymakers projected that the economy would remain resilient enough to keep growing and that the unemployment rate would fall from its current level of 3.8% to 3.5%, matching a 50-year low reached before the pandemic.

Some economists argue that such a painless outcome - what they refer to as a “soft landing” - is unrealistic, given the challenges the economy faces, including the potential for deeper economic disruptions resulting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The war has already raised the cost of oil, wheat, nickel and other vital commodities.

But Powell asserted that the Fed has achieved such soft landings before.

“I believe that the historical record provides some grounds for optimism,” he said “Soft, or at least soft-ish, landings have been relatively common in U.S. monetary history.”

Powell’s remarks followed a flurry of comments from officials concerning Fed policy since last week’s meeting, all pointing in a hawkish direction. (“Hawks” typically support higher interest rates to stave off inflation, while “doves” generally prefer lower rates to bolster hiring).

Also on Monday, Raphael Bostic, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, said that controlling inflation “is the top concern that I have for 2022.”

Bostic also said he expects the Fed will raise rates a total of six times this year, and twice more in 2023. That is a more dovish approach than most of his colleagues. But he emphasized that this was mostly because of the extreme uncertainty currently surrounding the economy. If more rate hikes were necessary to slow inflation, he would support them, he said.

“We’ve been in an emergency posture for a long time,” Bostic said. “We’re past that now from an economic perspective. We need to quickly get to neutral,” he said, referring to a level of interest rates that neither encourages nor slows economic growth.

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HEADLINE	03/21 States shutter mass testing sites
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/21/states-close-mass-testing-sites-virus-despite-fear/
GIST	<p>States are starting to shutter mass COVID-19 testing sites due to a drop in demand and an uptick in at-home testing even as the U.S. warily eyes a version of the omicron variant that spreads quickly and has sparked a wave in Europe.</p> <p>New Hampshire closed its state-run sites last week, South Carolina is closing its sites through March and Utah has been unwinding mass testing since February, according to a tally from the New York Times.</p> <p>The trend results from sagging demand as national case counts plummet to below 30,000 per day following the winter omicron spike that resulted in more than 800,000 infections per day at its mid-January peak.</p> <p>The downward slide in cases has plateaued in recent days, however, and scientists are wary of the BA.2 variant, a sub-form of omicron that spreads faster but is not believed to cause more severe disease. Federal scientists say they’re tracking the variant but don’t think they will call for more restrictions.</p> <p>Still, the decision to wind down testing locales isn’t sitting well with persons who don’t want to see the type of long lines and scramble that dominated the winter holiday period during the last surge.</p>

Some Massachusetts lawmakers told Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, to reconsider his decision to close a large number of PCR testing sites by the end of the month.

“The Stop the Spread site has proven invaluable in the battle to identify community outbreaks and take steps to curb higher education transmission rates and prevent spread to the wider community,” lawmakers wrote in a recent letter to the state Department of Public Health.

The Daily Hampshire Gazette reported that officials in Amherst and elsewhere are particularly worried about losing services on college campuses and would like them to continue until June 1.

“The discontinuation of this program comes at a critical time as the population is transitioning from mask mandates to navigating risk reduction,” the officials wrote. “At the end of this week approximately 30,000 students and other members of our community will be returning to Amherst from spring break. It is crucial to understand the direction of the disease in regards to case transmission, as well as new variants that may have different virulence or fitness.”

The BA.2 variant is fueling an uptick in COVID cases in the U.K. and other European nations, and the U.S. generally sees its own wave a few weeks after Europe gets hit.

The most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention variant accounted for nearly a quarter, or 23%, of sequenced U.S. samples during the week ending March 12, up from about 14% the previous week and 7% the week before that, indicating it is slowly becoming more prominent.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Sunday the new variant is 50% to 60% more transmissible than its predecessors.

“So it does have an increased transmission capability,” he said on ABC’s “This Week.” “However when you look at the cases they do not appear to be any more severe and they do not appear to evade immune responses — either from vaccines or prior infections.”

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HEADLINE	03/22 US: ‘clear sign’ Putin to chemical weapons
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/22/clear-sign-putin-is-weighing-up-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-ukraine-says-biden
GIST	<p>Russia’s false accusation that Ukraine has biological and chemical weapons is a “clear sign” that a desperate Vladimir Putin is considering using them himself, Joe Biden has said.</p> <p>The US president said Putin’s “back is against the wall and now he’s talking about new false flags he’s setting up including, asserting that we in America have biological as well as chemical weapons in Europe – simply not true. I guarantee you,” Biden said at an event on Monday.</p> <p>“They are also suggesting that Ukraine has biological and chemical weapons in Ukraine. That’s a clear sign he’s considering using both of those. He’s already used chemical weapons in the past, and we should be careful of what’s about to come.”</p> <p>Putin “knows there’ll be severe consequences because of the united Nato front,” he said, without specifying what actions the alliance would take.</p> <p>The remarks echo previous comments by officials in Washington and allied countries, who have accused Russia of spreading an unproven claim that Ukraine had a biological weapons program as a possible prelude to potentially launching its own biological or chemical attacks.</p> <p>Biden spoke after the Pentagon said it had seen “clear evidence” Russian forces were committing war crimes and that it was helping collect evidence. Last week, the US president said he thought Putin was a</p>

	<p>“war criminal”, as well as a “murderous dictator” and “thug”, comments the Russian foreign ministry said were “unworthy of a state figure of such a high rank” and risked rupturing US-Russian ties.</p> <p>The UN’s international court of justice has already ordered Moscow to halt its invasion, and a prosecutor at the international criminal court has launched a war crimes investigation.</p> <p>On Monday night, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy again urged direct talks with Putin, saying: “Without this meeting it is impossible to fully understand what they are ready for in order to stop the war.”</p> <p>He also said his country will never bow to ultimatums from Russia and cities directly under attack, including the capital, Kyiv, and Mariupol and Kharkiv would not accept Russian occupation.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 WA adapts; learning to live with Covid
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/washington-adapts-to-virus-even-as-experts-say-covid-19-will-be-with-us-for-a-long-time
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The number of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Washington state have dropped to the point where health leaders say we have reached the turning point where we are just going to have to learn to co-exist with coronavirus.</p> <p>But even though the state and the country may have turned the corner on the pandemic, the reality is that COVID is going to be with us for a long time.</p> <p>You can see it all over the state with people are eager to return to a normal, pre-COVID life.</p> <p>“Today, they’re going great,” said Danelle San Jaylene of the Blazing Onion Restaurant in Gig Harbor. “We’ve been steadily busy moving forward with the mask mandate lifting. Our guests are happy, our team is happy. We’re thankful to be here to bounce back after the COVID-19. Everything has been great.”</p> <p>The staff said some people are choosing not to wear face masks now that the state's mandate has expired but some patrons are choosing to wear them.</p> <p>“I would say it’s about a 40-60 ratio,” San Jaylene said. “You’ll still see people coming in with them, but our sign is very clear. We respect what is best for you and yours. If you choose to wear it, great. If you choose not to wear it, more power to you.”</p> <p>Naomi Wilson, of the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, said, “We’re going to still need to know when and where to use a mask and they might be with us and useful in many situations moving forward.”</p> <p>Wilson said masks are still important for those who are vulnerable and vaccinations are extremely important as the state evolves into a phase of co-existing with the virus.</p> <p>“COVID is here to stay with us and so it’s not gone,” she said. “And we need to make sure we’re doing what we can not to just protect ourselves as individuals, but protect our community.”</p> <p>The case counts has led to some cautious optimism in some quarters.</p> <p>“We’re not seeing a rise in cases at the national level,” said Dr. Ali Mokdad, a top researcher at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. “They’ve slowed down a little bit and it’s declining. We feel that the pandemic phase of COVID-19 is over and we’re moving into an endemic phase. But it’s time for all of us to go back to our normal lives. I did personally and I’m travelling and I’m going and eating out in restaurants as well.”</p> <p>But Mokdad said COVID could throw another curve with a new omicron sub-variant.</p>

"It's very possible," he said. "Right now, as you have seen we have omicron BA.1 and BA.2. BA.2 is taking over right now. We've seen a rise in cases in many European countries that we've kept an eye on a number of times."

But at this point he said we may not see a rise in cases here.

"The measures that we put in place are not needed anymore," he said. "It doesn't mean the virus will disappear. COVID-19 will be with us for a long time."

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HEADLINE	03/21 Seattle quickly removes homeless camp
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/project-seattle/seattle-crews-remove-camp-in-lake-city-neighborhood-next-to-thornton-creek
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Municipal crews on Monday cleared a problematic homeless encampment that had taken root in a Lake City neighborhood on city-owned property and right in the middle of a watershed</p> <p>KOMO News featured the camp during a Project Seattle report last week but municipal crews and officers from the Seattle Police Department quickly moved in and removed the camp and its residents.</p> <p>City officials did not immediately say what led to the prompt removal of the camp or how they are prioritizing the sites for removal but the location has been more than a nuisance to area residents who have complained about crime and safety issues posed by the camp.</p> <p>Seattle crews moved in Monday to clear an encampment from a neighborhood next to Thornton Creek.</p> <p>There were about a dozen campers living in six tents and an area where the residents were living inside a nearby carport in the area.</p> <p>But neighbors had complained about the campers using drugs, stealing homeowners' mails, setting fires and leaving mounds of garbage that was strewn on the grounds and in rushing creek water.</p> <p>Municipal crews moved in Monday and cleared an encampment that had taken root next to Thornton Creek.</p> <p>The residents said they worry about the health of the watershed but also are concerned about the homeless people who were in the tents.</p> <p>The residents said they want the campers to find permanent shelter inside.</p> <p>One of the campers said he declined a city offer of a bed in a men's shelter even though he has had to grapple over the past few days with a steady chilly rain that has fallen in Seattle over the past few days.</p> <p>"Dealing with the elements out here is the toughest things," the camper said. "The rain (and) cold, that's the monster you have to battle out here."</p> <p>A woman who lives in the area who did not want KOMO News to reveal her last name said the city should work to implement a permanent solution.</p> <p>"They'll be back," Betty said. "We've got to find a better way for them to have a stable place to be."</p> <p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell vowed to lead with compassion, which means the goal is to not only remove unauthorized encampments but find long-term shelter for campers while also connecting them with much needed services.</p>

	<p>Harrell's office did not immediately comment on the issue and Seattle City Councilwoman Debora Juarez, who represents the area, pointed to a district newsletter in which she said concerns about the camp came to her attention in late February. There were also concerns that the camp was being used for on-site drug manufacturing.</p> <p>Seattle police said they were unable to find any evidence, however, of drug manufacturing at the location.</p> <p>The location is a pricey piece of property.</p> <p>The city purchased the site -- now known as the Little Red House property -- for over \$1 million in August 2019 because it's a house perched in a woodland setting with a creek that runs through it.</p> <p>But the city bought the site and did nothing with it despite plans to convert it into a Lake City flood plain park with plans that included cultivating green space and adding a nature preserve.</p> <p>City officials said the goal is to start the restoration work by the end of this year.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Seattle gas prices drop; average \$4.87
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-gas-prices-dropped-over-last-week-still-nearly-150-higher-than-last-year
GIST	<p>SEATTLE – Gas prices dropped in Seattle over the last week, though they are still higher than they were a year ago.</p> <p>The average price per gallon is at \$4.87, according to GasBuddy's 775 gas station survey in Seattle. This is 1.8 cents lower than it was last week.</p> <p>It's still 73.9 cents higher than it was a month ago and \$1.43 higher than it was last year.</p> <p>The cheapest gas available in Seattle is \$4.24 per gallon, the most expensive is \$5.59. Sunday's lowest price was \$3.94.</p> <p>Seattle is more expensive than the nation average, which dropped nine cents to \$4.23 per gallon.</p> <p>Neighbors in Tacoma are seeing gas prices averaging \$4.74 per gallon.</p> <p>"GasBuddy, last week, predicted that a top was in for the national average price of gasoline, and indeed, for the first time in 12 weeks, the national average price of gasoline has declined," said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy. "While the decline is still subject to changes in global supply and demand, Covid and Russia's war on Ukraine, we are poised to see additional downdrafts at the pump this week in most areas."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Report: half rejected offer of shelter in 2021
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/report-more-than-half-of-homeless-people-offered-shelter-by-city-of-seattle-say-no
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - More than half of people removed from encampments by the city of Seattle rejected the offer of shelter in 2021, according to a report from PubliCola.</p> <p>According to the report, the city's Homelessness Outreach and Provider Ecosystem (HOPE) team referred 1,072 people to a shelter during the year, but only 512 people actually "enrolled" and spent at least one night there. By comparison, the city referred 815 people to shelters in 2020 and 265 spent at least one night at a shelter.</p>

"We can't force someone to accept the offer, but we are doing everything in our power to build relationships up until that point that we have a better chance for them to say yes" said Michael Bailey, the deputy director of Seattle's Human Services Department told Seattle City Councilmembers last week.

Bailey said 92% of referrals were for the [city's 24/7 enhanced shelter or tiny house villages](#) and include case management and potential treatment for drug, alcohol abuse and behavioral services.

The referrals were made from 119 different encampment locations.

The [concern expressed by many city council members was the apparent increase in the number of camp removals](#) considered "obstructions" by the city. If an encampment is blocking access to sidewalk or driveway, it's considered an obstruction.

In those instances, under the city's Multi-Departmental Administrative Rules, the [camp can be removed immediately](#) without the traditional 72-hour warning notice to camp occupants.

Councilmember Tammy Morales showed concern over the [apparent displacement of people who are just moving from one camp to another](#) when there's an encampment sweep.

"That's what we are trying to measure, how that number starts to decrease" Morales said. "If we are not paying attention to it, if we are tacitly ignoring it, we are not going to solve that problem."

The city is still performing its own camp removals and referrals to shelters even as the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) begins to take over the same operations.

Marc Dones, the CEO of the KCRHA, said it's [possible to reduce the number of unsheltered people living in downtown Seattle](#) to zero in 10 to 12 months with the stakeholder cooperation.

"It can happen, if they give us housing" says Dale Moquion who lives in a camp on the sidewalk near the north terminus of the South Lake Union Trolley.

"Oh no, differently not," a woman named Sara, who lives in the same encampment, said. "Because there are people who want to be out here."

Sara said "that's a good question, I don't know," when asked what it would take to get her off the street. Rickey Mane, who was just released from prison and lives in a shelter, didn't believe the 'zero' goal can be achieved.

"I don't know how they are going to do that," he says. "But if they want, they can start with me, so I'm here, mayor, if you want to come and get me a house."

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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia stalled elsewhere advances in east
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/world/europe/ukraine-maps.html
GIST	<p>Ukrainian forces continue to hold off Russian advances near Kyiv, Kharkiv and in large parts of the South. But in the east, Russian forces have made steady progress in recent days, moving west from the separatist-held territory of Donbas.</p> <p>Russian forces in many parts of the country have been hindered by supply issues, with units pausing operations while they regroup.</p> <p>An assessment published on Sunday by the Institute for the Study of War said that Russian forces will likely expand their bombing campaign on Kyiv instead of trying to encircle the city in the coming weeks.</p>

	<p>The group also reported that Russian forces are strengthening their defensive positions in captured areas and moving artillery into positions that can strike central Kyiv.</p> <p>Even as Ukrainians hold the line outside major cities, the position of the Ukrainian army in the east looks increasingly precarious, according to an analysis this week by researchers at RUSI, a military analysis group. Those forces could risk becoming encircled by Russian troops advancing along several paths east of the Dnieper River.</p> <p>Those advances have left a vast trail of destruction, according to witnesses, imagery and statements from local officials.</p> <p>Russian forces have moved into several villages west of the city of Donetsk in the last couple of days. Farther north, they have pummeled the city of Izium, which has no heat, food, water or other basic services, although the Russian and Ukrainian sides dispute who controls the city.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Oligarch invested billions US hedge funds
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/business/russia-roman-abramovich-concord.html
GIST	<p>In July 2012, a shell company registered in the British Virgin Islands wired \$20 million to an investment vehicle in the Cayman Islands that was controlled by a large American hedge fund firm.</p> <p>The wire transfer was the culmination of months of work by a small army of handlers and enablers in the United States, Europe and the Caribbean. It was a stealth operation intended, at least in part, to mask the source of the funds: Roman Abramovich.</p> <p>For two decades, the Russian oligarch has relied on this circuitous investment strategy — deploying a string of shell companies, routing money through a small Austrian bank and tapping the connections of leading Wall Street firms — to quietly place billions of dollars with prominent U.S. hedge funds and private equity firms, according to people with knowledge of the transactions.</p> <p>The key was that every lawyer, corporate director, hedge fund manager and investment adviser involved in the process could honestly say he or she wasn't working directly for Mr. Abramovich. In some cases, participants weren't even aware of whose money they were helping to manage.</p> <p>Wealthy foreign investors like Mr. Abramovich have long been able to move money into American funds using such secretive, roundabout setups, taking advantage of a lightly regulated investment industry and Wall Street's willingness to ask few questions about the origins of the money.</p> <p>Now, as the United States and other countries impose sanctions on those close to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, hunting down these fortunes could pose significant challenges.</p> <p>Last week, the Internal Revenue Service asked Congress for more resources as it helps to oversee the Biden administration's sanctions program along with a new Justice Department kleptocracy task force. And on Capitol Hill, lawmakers are pushing a bill, known as the Enablers Act, that would require investment advisers to identify and more carefully vet their customers.</p> <p>Mr. Abramovich has an estimated fortune of \$13 billion, derived in large part from his well-timed purchase of an oil company owned by the Russian government that he sold back to the state at a massive profit. This month, European and Canadian authorities imposed sanctions on him and froze his assets, which include the famed Chelsea Football Club in London. The United States has not placed sanctions on him.</p> <p>Mr. Abramovich's assets in the United States include many millions of dollars of real estate, such as a pair of luxury residences near Aspen, Colo. But he also invested large sums of money with financial institutions. His ties to Mr. Putin and the source of his wealth have long made him a controversial figure.</p>

Many of Mr. Abramovich's U.S. investments were facilitated by a small firm, [Concord Management](#), which is led by Michael Matlin, according to people with knowledge of the transactions who were not authorized to speak publicly.

Mr. Matlin declined to comment beyond issuing a statement that described Concord as "a consulting firm that provides independent third-party research, due diligence and monitoring of investments."

A spokeswoman for Mr. Abramovich didn't respond to emails and text messages requesting comment.

Concord, founded in 1999, didn't directly manage any of Mr. Abramovich's money. It acted more like an investment adviser and due diligence firm, making recommendations to the directors of shell companies in Caribbean tax havens about potential investments in marquee American investment firms, according to people briefed on the matter.

Big Wall Street banks like Credit Suisse, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley often introduced Concord executives to hedge funds, according to people with knowledge of those meetings.

Over the years, Concord arranged more than 100 investments in different hedge funds and private equity firms, mostly for Mr. Abramovich, according to an internal document prepared by one Wall Street firm. They included funds managed by Millennium Management, BlackRock, Sarissa Capital Management, Carlyle Group, D.E. Shaw and Bear Stearns, according to people briefed on the matter and the document.

Concord kept a low profile. It didn't have a website. It is not registered with U.S. regulators. One of the few times it surfaced in public was in 2020, when Concord applied for and received a [Paycheck Protection Program loan worth \\$265,000](#) during the pandemic. (Concord repaid the loan, a spokesman said.)

Concord's secrecy made some on Wall Street wary.

In 2015 and 2016, investigators at State Street, a financial services firm, filed "suspicious activity reports" alerting the U.S. government to transactions that Concord arranged involving some of Mr. Abramovich's Caribbean shell companies, BuzzFeed News [reported](#). State Street declined to comment.

American financial institutions are required to file such reports to help the U.S. government combat money laundering and other financial crimes, though the reports are not themselves evidence of any wrongdoing having been committed.

But for the most part, American financiers had no inkling about — or interest in discovering — the source of the money that Concord was directing. As long as routine background checks didn't turn up red flags, it was fine.

Paulson & Company, the hedge fund run by John Paulson, received investments from a company that Concord represented, according to a person with knowledge of the investment. Mr. Paulson said in an email that he had "no knowledge" of Concord's investors.

Concord also steered tens of millions of dollars from two shell companies to Highland Capital, a Texas hedge fund. Highland hired a unit of JPMorgan Chase, the nation's largest bank, to ensure that the companies were legitimate and that the investments complied with anti-money-laundering rules, according to federal court records in an unrelated bankruptcy case.

JPMorgan cleared the investment. Highland never learned the ultimate source of the money, the court records show.

Big hedge funds might have accepted the money even if they realized it belonged to Mr. Abramovich. At the time, the oligarch wasn't under sanctions.

The manner in which one hedge fund received Mr. Abramovich's money in the summer of 2012 shows the challenges facing U.S. and European authorities who hope to track down the assets of him and other oligarchs.

The manager of the fund, which oversaw billions of dollars but wasn't a big name on Wall Street, provided a detailed accounting of his involvement on the condition that neither he nor his firm be named.

In 2012, a New York-based wealth manager at Credit Suisse, Gerald McGinley, contacted the fund manager on behalf of what he said was a wealthy family. Mr. McGinley said Concord was representing the family and was interested in investing tens of millions of dollars with the hedge fund.

The fund manager said Credit Suisse had told him that in order to receive the investment, he would have to set up a special financial vehicle in an offshore jurisdiction, so that the investment wouldn't incur U.S. taxes. The hedge fund would receive a small percentage of the total investment as a fee, and Credit Suisse would get 20 percent of that fee.

Accompanied by one of Mr. McGinley's colleagues at Credit Suisse, the fund manager traveled to Concord's offices in a drab building in the New York City suburb of Tarrytown. Thick metal doors hid its offices from other occupants of the building. Inside, the walls were devoid of artwork or decorations.

The fund manager didn't know who Concord's client was, and he didn't ask.

Mr. McGinley, who now works at the Swiss bank UBS, didn't respond to questions about his work with Concord. A Credit Suisse spokeswoman declined to comment.

After initially meeting with the fund manager, Concord executives referred him to HighWater, a firm based in Grand Cayman that specialized in providing ["corporate governance services"](#) to investment managers.

For \$15,000 a year, plus other fees, HighWater would provide an employee to sit on the board of the financial vehicle that the fund manager was expected to launch to accept the wealthy family's money, according to emails between the fund manager and a HighWater executive reviewed by The New York Times.

The fund manager also brought on Boris Onefater, who ran a small U.S. consulting firm, Constellation, as another board member. Mr. Onefater said in an interview that he couldn't remember whose money the Cayman vehicle was managing. "You're asking for ancient history," he said. "I don't recall Mr. Abramovich's name coming up."

The fund manager hired Mourant, an offshore law firm, to get the paperwork for the Cayman vehicle in order. The managing partner of Mourant did not respond to requests for comment.

He also hired GlobeOp Financial Services, which provides administration services to hedge funds, to ensure that the Cayman entity was complying with anti-money-laundering laws and wasn't doing business with anyone who had been placed under U.S. government sanctions, according to a copy of the contract.

"We abide by all laws in all jurisdictions in which we do business," said Emma Lowrey, a spokeswoman for SS&C Technologies, a financial technology company based in Windsor, Conn., that now owns GlobeOp.

John Lewis, a HighWater executive, said in an email to The Times that his firm received four referrals from Concord from 2011 to 2014 and hadn't dealt with the firm since then.

"We were aware of no links to Russian money or Roman Abramovich," Mr. Lewis said. He added that GlobeOp "did not identify anything unusual, high risk, or that there were any politically exposed persons with respect to any investors."

The Cayman fund opened for business in July 2012 when \$20 million arrived by wire transfer. The expectation was that tens of millions more would follow, although additional funds never showed up. The Cayman fund was run as an independent entity, using the same investment strategy — buying and selling exchange-traded funds — employed by the fund manager’s main U.S. hedge fund.

The \$20 million was wired from an entity called Caythorpe Holdings, which was registered in the British Virgin Islands.

Documents accompanying the wire transfer showed that the money originated with Kathrein Privatbank in Vienna. It arrived in Grand Cayman after passing through another Austrian bank, Raiffeisen, and then JPMorgan. (JPMorgan was serving as a correspondent bank, essentially acting as an intermediary for banks with smaller international networks.)

A spokesman for Kathrein declined to comment. A spokeswoman for JPMorgan declined to comment. Representatives for Raiffeisen did not respond to requests for comment.

The fund manager noticed that some of the documentation was signed by a lawyer named Natalia Bychenkova. The Russian-sounding name led him to conclude that he was probably managing money for a Russian oligarch. But the fund manager wasn’t bothered, since GlobeOp had verified that Caythorpe was compliant with know-your-customer and anti-money-laundering rules and laws.

He didn’t know who controlled Caythorpe, and he didn’t ask.

In early 2014, after Russia invaded the Ukrainian region of Crimea, markets tanked. The fund manager made a bearish bet on the direction of the stock market, and his fund got crushed when stocks rallied.

The next year, Caythorpe withdrew its money from the Cayman fund. Caythorpe was liquidated in 2017.

The fund manager said he didn’t realize until this month that he had been investing money for Mr. Abramovich.

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HEADLINE	03/21 ‘Chances low, rising’ Putin tactical nukes
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/science/russia-nuclear-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>In destructive power, the behemoths of the Cold War dwarfed the American atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.</p> <p>Washington’s biggest test blast was 1,000 times as large. Moscow’s was 3,000 times. On both sides, the idea was to deter strikes with threats of vast retaliation — with mutual assured destruction, or MAD. The psychological bar was so high that nuclear strikes came to be seen as unthinkable.</p> <p>Today, both Russia and the United States have nuclear arms that are much less destructive — their power just fractions of the Hiroshima bomb’s force, their use perhaps less frightening and more thinkable.</p> <p>Concern about these smaller arms has soared as Vladimir V. Putin, in the Ukraine war, has warned of his nuclear might, has put his atomic forces on alert and has had his military carry out risky attacks on nuclear power plants. The fear is that if Mr. Putin feels cornered in the conflict, he might choose to detonate one of his lesser nuclear arms — breaking the taboo set 76 years ago after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.</p> <p>Analysts note that Russian troops have long practiced the transition from conventional to nuclear war, especially as a way to gain the upper hand after battlefield losses. And the military, they add, wielding the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, has explored a variety of escalatory options that Mr. Putin might choose from.</p>

“The chances are low but rising,” said [Ulrich Kühn](#), a nuclear expert at the University of Hamburg and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “The war is not going well for the Russians,” he observed, “and the pressure from the West is increasing.”

Mr. Putin might fire a weapon at an uninhabited area instead of at troops, Dr. Kühn said. In [a 2018 study](#), he laid out a crisis scenario in which Moscow detonated a bomb over a remote part of the North Sea as a way to signal deadlier strikes to come.

“It feels horrible to talk about these things,” Dr. Kühn said in an interview. “But we have to consider that this is becoming a possibility.”

Washington expects more atomic moves from Mr. Putin in the days ahead. Moscow is likely to “increasingly rely on its nuclear deterrent to signal the West and project strength” as the war and its consequences weaken Russia, Lt. Gen. [Scott D. Berrier](#), director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, [told](#) the House Armed Services Committee on Thursday.

President Biden is traveling to a NATO summit in Brussels this week [to discuss](#) the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The agenda is expected to include how the alliance will respond if Russia employs chemical, biological, cyber or nuclear weapons.

[James R. Clapper Jr.](#), a retired Air Force general who served as President Barack Obama’s director of national intelligence, said Moscow had lowered its bar for atomic use after the Cold War when the Russian army fell into disarray. Today, he added, Russia regards nuclear arms as utilitarian rather than unthinkable.

“They didn’t care,” Mr. Clapper said of Russian troops’ risking a radiation release earlier this month [when they attacked](#) the Zaporizhzhia nuclear reactor site — the largest not only in Ukraine but in Europe. “They went ahead and fired on it. That’s indicative of the Russian laissez-faire attitude. They don’t make the distinctions that we do on nuclear weapons.”

Mr. Putin [announced last month that he was](#) putting Russian nuclear forces into “special combat readiness.” [Pavel Podvig](#), a longtime researcher of Russia’s nuclear forces, said the alert had most likely primed the Russian command and control system for the possibility of receiving a nuclear order.

It’s unclear how Russia exerts control over its arsenal of less destructive arms. But some U.S. politicians and experts have denounced the smaller weapons on both sides as threatening to upend the global balance of nuclear terror.

For Russia, military analysts note, edgy displays of the less destructive arms have let Mr. Putin polish his reputation for deadly brinkmanship and expand the zone of intimidation he needs to fight a bloody conventional war.

“Putin is using nuclear deterrence to have his way in Ukraine,” said [Nina Tannenwald](#), a political scientist at Brown University who [recently profiled](#) the less powerful armaments. “His nuclear weapons keep the West from intervening.”

A global race for the smaller arms [is intensifying](#). Though such weapons are less destructive by Cold War standards, modern estimates [show that](#) the equivalent of half a Hiroshima bomb, if detonated in Midtown Manhattan, would kill or injure half a million people.

The case against these arms is that they undermine the nuclear taboo and make crisis situations even more dangerous. Their less destructive nature, critics say, can feed the illusion of atomic control when in fact their use can suddenly flare into a full-blown nuclear war. A [simulation](#) devised by experts at Princeton University starts with Moscow firing a nuclear warning shot; NATO responds with a small strike, and the ensuing war yields [more than 90 million casualties](#) in its first few hours.

No arms control treaties [regulate](#) the lesser warheads, known sometimes as tactical or nonstrategic nuclear weapons, so the nuclear superpowers make and deploy as many as they want. Russia has [perhaps 2,000](#), according to [Hans M. Kristensen](#), director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists, a private group in Washington. And the United States has roughly 100 in Europe, a number limited by domestic policy disputes and the political complexities of basing them among NATO allies, whose populations often [resist and protest](#) the weapons' presence.

Russia's atomic war doctrine [came to be known as](#) "escalate to de-escalate" — meaning routed troops would fire a nuclear weapon to stun an aggressor into retreat or submission. Moscow repeatedly practiced the tactic in field exercises. In 1999, for instance, a large drill [simulated](#) a NATO attack on Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea. The exercise had Russian forces in disarray until Moscow fired nuclear arms at [Poland and the United States](#).

Dr. Kühn of the University of Hamburg said the defensive training drills of the 1990s had turned toward offense in the 2000s as the Russian army regained some of its former strength.

Concurrent with its [new offensive strategy](#), Russia embarked on [a modernization](#) of its nuclear forces, including its less destructive arms. As in the West, some of the warheads were given variable explosive yields that could be dialed up or down depending on the military situation.

A centerpiece of the new arsenal was the Iskander-M, first [deployed in 2005](#). The mobile launcher can fire two missiles that travel roughly 300 miles. The missiles can carry conventional as well as nuclear warheads. [Russian figures](#) put the smallest nuclear blast from those missiles at roughly a third that of the Hiroshima bomb.

Before the Russian army invaded Ukraine, satellite images showed that Moscow had deployed Iskander missile batteries [in Belarus](#) and to its east [in Russian territory](#). There's no public data on whether Russia has armed any of the Iskanders with nuclear warheads.

[Nikolai Sokov](#), a former Russian diplomat who negotiated arms control treaties in Soviet times, said that nuclear warheads could also be placed on cruise missiles. The low-flying weapons, launched from planes, ships or the ground, [hug the local terrain](#) to avoid detection by enemy radar.

From inside Russian territory, he said, "they can reach all of Europe," including Britain.

Over the years, the United States and its NATO allies have sought to rival Russia's arsenal of lesser nuclear arms. It started decades ago as the United States began sending bombs for fighter jets to military bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the Netherlands. Dr. Kühn [noted](#) that the alliance, in contrast to Russia, does not conduct field drills practicing a transition from conventional to nuclear war.

In 2010, Mr. Obama, who had [long advocated](#) for a "nuclear-free world," [decided](#) to refurbish and improve the NATO weapons, turning them into [smart bombs](#) with maneuverable fins that made their targeting highly precise. That, in turn, gave war planners the freedom to lower the weapons' variable explosive force to as little as 2 percent of that of the Hiroshima bomb.

The reduced blast capability made breaking the nuclear taboo "more thinkable," Gen. [James E. Cartwright](#), a vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Mr. Obama, [warned](#) at the time. He nonetheless backed the program because the high degree of precision lowered the risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties. But after [years of funding and manufacturing delays](#), the refurbished bomb, known as the B61 Model 12, is not expected to be deployed in Europe until next year, Mr. Kristensen said.

The steady Russian buildups and the slow American responses prompted the Trump administration to [propose](#) a new missile warhead in 2018. Its destructive force was seen as roughly half that of the Hiroshima bomb, according to Mr. Kristensen. It was to be deployed on [the nation's fleet](#) of 14 ballistic missile submarines.

While [some experts warned](#) that the bomb, known as the W76 Model 2, could make it more tempting for a president to order a nuclear strike, the Trump administration [argued](#) that the weapon would lower the risk of war by ensuring that Russia would face the threat of proportional counterstrikes. It was [deployed in late 2019](#).

“It’s all about psychology — deadly psychology,” said [Franklin C. Miller](#), a nuclear expert who backed the new warhead and, before leaving public office in 2005, held Pentagon and White House posts for three decades. “If your opponent thinks he has a battlefield edge, you try to convince him that he’s wrong.”

When he was a candidate for the presidency, Joseph R. Biden Jr. [called](#) the less powerful warhead a “bad idea” that would make presidents “more inclined” to use it. But Mr. Kristensen said the Biden administration seemed unlikely to remove the new warhead from the nation’s submarines.

It’s unclear how Mr. Biden would respond to the use of a nuclear weapon by Mr. Putin. Nuclear war plans are one of Washington’s most [deeply held secrets](#). Experts say that the war-fighting plans in general go from warning shots to single strikes to multiple retaliations and that the hardest question is whether there are reliable ways to prevent a conflict from escalating.

Even Mr. Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, said he was unsure how he would advise Mr. Biden if Mr. Putin unleashed his nuclear arms.

“When do you stop?” he asked of nuclear retaliation. “You can’t just keep turning the other cheek. At some point we’d have to do something.”

A U.S. response to a small Russian blast, experts say, might be to fire one of the new submarine-launched warheads into the wilds of Siberia or at a military base inside Russia. Mr. Miller, the former government nuclear official and a [former chairman](#) of NATO’s nuclear policy committee, said such a blast would be a way of signaling to Moscow that “this is serious, that things are getting out of hand.”

Military strategists [say](#) a tit-for-tat rejoinder would throw the responsibility for further escalation back at Russia, making Moscow feel its [ominous weight](#) and ideally keeping the situation from spinning out of control despite the dangers in war of miscalculation and accident.

In a darker scenario, Mr. Putin might resort to using atomic arms if the war in Ukraine spilled into neighboring NATO states. All NATO members, including the United States, are obliged to defend one another — potentially with salvos of nuclear warheads.

Dr. Tannenwald, the political scientist at Brown University, wondered if the old protections of nuclear deterrence, now rooted in opposing lines of less destructive arms, would succeed in keeping the peace. “It sure doesn’t feel that way in a crisis,” she said.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Hong Kong faces rising Covid death rate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/health/covid-hong-kong-deaths.html
GIST	<p>The first time the Omicron variant breached Hong Kong’s coronavirus defenses, in late 2021, the city stamped it out, cementing its status as one of the world’s most formidable redoubts of “zero Covid.”</p> <p>But a few weeks later, Omicron came to the metropolis again, this time causing an outbreak among cleaners at a public-housing estate that spiraled out of control. The conflagration of resulting cases is now killing people at a rate exceeding that of almost any country since the coronavirus emerged.</p> <p>Over the entire pandemic, Hong Kong’s death toll per capita, once far lower than those of Western nations, is no longer exceptional. A month ago, Americans had died from Covid at 90 times the rate of people in Hong Kong. By Monday, the cumulative American toll was three and a half times as high.</p>

As the United States braces for its own, less punishing [rise in cases](#), and mainland China battles its [biggest outbreak in two years](#), scientists have looked to Hong Kong for clues about the threat Omicron poses in an entirely different setting: a dense city where people were not only largely untouched by previous infections, but whose oldest and most vulnerable residents were also largely unvaccinated.

Several critical lessons emerged, health experts said.

In the era of Omicron and its even more infectious subvariant, BA.2, vaccinating a broad swath of the population remained important, scientists said. But inoculating as many older people as possible had become far and away the top priority.

That message, they said, was most pressing for China, where vaccinations in older age groups also appear to be lagging and there is little immunity from earlier infections.

But it was relevant again in the United States, too, where subpar vaccination and booster rates among older people have left scientists concerned about a potential surge of BA.2 cases. Partly because so many more Americans have been infected and killed by the coronavirus during earlier waves, scientists do not expect the United States to face as serious a situation in the coming months as Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's dreadful outbreak also signals the perils of trying to eliminate the virus without a plan for what would come next, health experts said. Omicron's high transmissibility, they said, made outbreaks almost inevitable.

Hong Kong, which along with mainland China had been among the last holdouts of a strategy of tight restrictions and border controls to eradicate the virus, was left vulnerable by how few of its residents had any immunity from prior infections: Before the Omicron surge, scientists estimated that only 1 percent of Hong Kong's population had contracted the virus.

Those low levels of immunity can leave places vulnerable to waves of cases, as more contagious variants sneak in or restrictions are lifted. But governments can still prepare for those waves, said Dr. Gabriel Leung, the dean of medicine at the University of Hong Kong.

Less than one-quarter of people aged 80 and over in Hong Kong had been given two doses of a vaccine before Omicron surged, compared with more than 90 percent of people in Singapore and New Zealand.

Because of the number of unvaccinated older people in China, scientists said, it might also have some difficulty lifting "zero Covid" restrictions. More than 87 percent of China's population have been vaccinated. But just over half of people 80 and older have had two shots, and less than 20 percent of people in that age group have received a booster, Zeng Yixin, a vice minister of the National Health Commission, said on Friday.

"I don't think it's quite ready for the transition," Dr. Leung said.

A number of Asian and Pacific countries had largely kept the virus at bay for two years, only to face Omicron outbreaks because the virus was so contagious and their populations had avoided earlier infections. But high vaccination rates, including among older people, have helped many of those countries avoid more devastating surges.

In South Korea, for example, where 87 percent of people are vaccinated and 63 percent have booster shots, the cumulative death toll per capita is one-tenth of America's, even though South Korea has recorded more than three-quarters as many cases as the United States over the entire pandemic.

Health experts said that Hong Kong's difficulties vaccinating older people resulted from a combination of complacency, given the city's earlier success in containing the virus, and unfounded fears that older people and those in poor health faced particular risks from vaccines.

The city has now vaccinated 39 percent of residents aged 80 and above, despite having inoculated almost two-thirds of 12- to 19-year-olds.

Many people in Hong Kong have been given the Chinese vaccine Sinovac, which appears to offer relatively little protection from Omicron infections but a better defense against severe disease. Scientists noted that almost 90 percent of people who died during the latest wave were not fully vaccinated, suggesting that getting shots to the most vulnerable is more important than the particular brand.

“The problem in Hong Kong is, we haven’t succeeded in vaccinating our most vulnerable population — the elderly, especially those staying in elderly-care homes,” said Dr. Siddharth Sridhar, a clinical virologist at the University of Hong Kong. “And as a result, we are in a very bad situation.”

The United States has vaccinated many more of its older residents than Hong Kong but fewer than Western Europe and has seen a high death rate. And as immunity from early vaccinations wanes and booster shots become critical for shoring up protection against Omicron among older people, the United States finds itself exposed on that count, too. About 41 percent of people 65 and over have not received a booster shot.

Unlike other parts of Asia that had gradually lifted restrictions in recent months, Hong Kong was not ready for its defenses to fail, scientists said.

“From the government’s point of view, there was such a strong fixation on ‘zero Covid’ that as long as that worked, vaccination was not necessarily the priority,” said Ben Cowling, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Hong Kong.

Many older residents and their families adopted the same view, public health experts said. If Hong Kong’s rigid social-distancing measures and careful border controls were going to keep the virus out anyway, the conventional thinking went, was getting a vaccine worth the trouble?

“If you’re telling people that the disease is never going to get in, then there’s less of an incentive to go and get vaccinated,” said Dr. David Owens, a family doctor in Hong Kong. “To an extent, the messaging around elimination confounded the need to vaccinate.”

Dr. Cowling, of the University of Hong Kong, said that his city could have responded in one of two ways to signs that cases would surge: either double down on “zero Covid” through measures like building better quarantine facilities for overseas arrivals, or acknowledge that outbreaks are unavoidable and raise vaccination rates.

“Zero Covid is a really good strategy if you can stay at zero,” Dr. Cowling said. “But as we found in Hong Kong, it doesn’t last forever.”

Hong Kong eventually took steps to persuade older people to become vaccinated, once earlier inducements like vaccine passes proved ineffective. In January, the government announced that it would ban unvaccinated people from restaurants that serve dim sum, which are popular among older residents. But it was too late.

With cases and deaths now declining, Hong Kong announced on Monday that it would lift certain restrictions.

Singapore began abandoning “zero Covid” policies in the summer. Dr. Ooi Eng Eong, an infectious disease expert at Duke-National University of Singapore Medical School, said that it took a wave of the Delta variant to raise vaccination rates and disabuse people of the notion that they did not need protection.

Now, cases in Singapore have surged, but deaths are relatively low.

	<p>“It’s so much more transmissible that I think wearing a face mask and all — that helps but not to the extent that it has impacted the epidemiology,” Dr. Ooi said of Omicron. “The trends are really driven by vaccination.”</p> <p>Still, even after five or six waves of the pandemic, the reasons that some countries have succeeded while others have suffered remain unclear.</p> <p>Japan, for example, has tamped down on cases throughout the pandemic without resorting to full-fledged lockdowns, scientists said.</p> <p>The country benefited from its government sharing sound public health advice early in the pandemic. As much as residents tired of precautions, they largely took the advice seriously, said Taro Yamamoto, a professor at the Institute of Tropical Medicine at Nagasaki University.</p> <p>Roughly 80 percent of people in Japan have had their initial vaccine series. But even though the country is lagging in administering booster doses and had a surge of Omicron infections, death rates during Omicron have remained considerably lower than in nearby South Korea.</p> <p>“Partly it’s a mystery,” Professor Yamamoto said. “We cannot explain it all.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Last journalists fleeing Mariupol
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/world/we-witnessed-mariupols-agony-and-fled-a-russian-hit-list/
GIST	<p>MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — The Russians were hunting us down. They had a list of names, including ours, and they were closing in.</p> <p>We had been documenting the siege of the Ukrainian city by Russian troops for more than two weeks and were the only international journalists left in the city. We were reporting inside the hospital when gunmen began stalking the corridors. Surgeons gave us white scrubs to wear as camouflage.</p> <p>Suddenly at dawn, a dozen soldiers burst in: “Where are the journalists?”</p> <p>I looked at their armbands, blue for Ukraine, and tried to calculate the odds that they were Russians in disguise. I stepped forward to identify myself. “We’re here to get you out,” they said.</p> <p>The walls of the surgery shook from artillery and machine gun fire outside, and it seemed safer to stay inside. But the Ukrainian soldiers were under orders to take us with them.</p> <p>—</p> <p>Mstyslav Chernov is a video journalist for The Associated Press. This is his account of the siege of Mariupol, as documented with photographer Evgeniy Maloletka and told to correspondent Lori Hinnant.</p> <p>—</p> <p>We ran into the street, abandoning the doctors who had sheltered us, the pregnant women who had been shelled and the people who slept in the hallways because they had nowhere else to go. I felt terrible leaving them all behind.</p> <p>Nine minutes, maybe 10, an eternity through roads and bombed-out apartment buildings. As shells crashed nearby, we dropped to the ground. Time was measured from one shell to the next, our bodies tense and breath held. Shockwave after shockwave jolted my chest, and my hands went cold.</p> <p>We reached an entryway, and armored cars whisked us to a darkened basement. Only then did we learn from a policeman we knew why the Ukrainians had risked the lives of soldiers to extract us from the hospital.</p> <p>“If they catch you, they will get you on camera and they will make you say that everything you filmed is a lie,” he said. “All your efforts and everything you have done in Mariupol will be in vain.”</p>

The officer, who had once begged us to show the world his dying city, now pleaded with us to go. He nudged us toward the thousands of battered cars preparing to leave Mariupol.

It was March 15. We had no idea if we would make it out alive.

As a teenager growing up in Ukraine in the city of Kharkiv, just 20 miles from the Russian border, I learned how to handle a gun as part of the school curriculum. It seemed pointless. Ukraine, I reasoned, was surrounded by friends.

I have since covered wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, trying to show the world the devastation first-hand. But when the Americans and then the Europeans evacuated their embassy staffs from the city of Kyiv this winter, and when I pored over maps of the Russian troop build-up just across from my hometown, my only thought was, “My poor country.”

In the first few days of the war, the Russians bombed the enormous Freedom Square in Kharkiv, where I had hung out until my 20s.

I knew Russian forces would see the eastern port city of Mariupol as a strategic prize because of its location on the Sea of Azov. So on the evening of Feb. 23, I headed there with my long-time colleague Evgeniy Maloletka, a Ukrainian photographer for The Associated Press, in his white Volkswagen van.

On the way, we started worrying about spare tires, and found online a man nearby willing to sell to us in the middle of the night. We explained to him and to a cashier at the all-night grocery store that we were preparing for war. They looked at us like we were crazy.

We pulled into Mariupol at 3:30 a.m. The war started an hour later.

About a quarter of Mariupol’s 430,000 residents left in those first days, while they still could. But few people believed a war was coming, and by the time most realized their mistake, it was too late.

One bomb at a time, the Russians cut electricity, water, food supplies and finally, crucially, the cell phone, radio and television towers. The few other journalists in the city got out before the last connections were gone and a full blockade settled in.

The absence of information in a blockade accomplishes two goals.

Chaos is the first. People don’t know what’s going on, and they panic. At first I couldn’t understand why Mariupol fell apart so quickly. Now I know it was because of the lack of communication.

Impunity is the second goal. With no information coming out of a city, no pictures of demolished buildings and dying children, the Russian forces could do whatever they wanted. If not for us, there would be nothing.

That’s why we took such risks to be able to send the world what we saw, and that’s what made Russia angry enough to hunt us down.

I have never, ever felt that breaking the silence was so important.

The deaths came fast. On Feb. 27, we watched as a doctor tried to save a little girl hit by shrapnel. She died.

A second child died, then a third. Ambulances stopped picking up the wounded because people couldn’t call them without a signal, and they couldn’t navigate the bombed-out streets.

The doctors pleaded with us to film families bringing in their own dead and wounded, and let us use their dwindling generator power for our cameras. No one knows what's going on in our city, they said.

Shelling hit the hospital and the houses around. It shattered the windows of our van, blew a hole into its side and punctured a tire. Sometimes we would run out to film a burning house and then run back amid the explosions.

There was still one place in the city to get a steady connection, outside a looted grocery store on Budivěl'nykiv Avenue. Once a day, we drove there and crouched beneath the stairs to upload photos and video to the world. The stairs wouldn't have done much to protect us, but it felt safer than being out in the open.

The signal vanished by March 3. We tried to send our video from the 7th-floor windows of the hospital. It was from there that we saw the last shreds of the solid middle-class city of Mariupol come apart.

The Port City superstore was being looted, and we headed that way through artillery and machine gunfire. Dozens of people ran and pushed shopping carts loaded with electronics, food, clothes.

A shell exploded on the roof of the store, throwing me to the ground outside. I tensed, awaiting a second hit, and cursed myself a hundred times because my camera wasn't on to record it.

And there it was, another shell hitting the apartment building next to me with a terrible whoosh. I shrank behind a corner for cover.

A teenager passed by rolling an office chair loaded with electronics, boxes tumbling off the sides. "My friends were there and the shell hit 10 meters from us," he told me. "I have no idea what happened to them."

We raced back to the hospital. Within 20 minutes, the injured came in, some of them scooped into shopping carts.

For several days, the only link we had to the outside world was through a satellite phone. And the only spot where that phone worked was out in the open, right next to a shell crater. I would sit down, make myself small and try to catch the connection.

Everybody was asking, please tell us when the war will be over. I had no answer.

Every single day, there would be a rumor that the Ukrainian army was going to come to break through the siege. But no one came.

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By this time I had witnessed deaths at the hospital, corpses in the streets, dozens of bodies shoved into a mass grave. I had seen so much death that I was filming almost without taking it in.

On March 9, twin airstrikes shredded the plastic taped over our van's windows. I saw the fireball just a heartbeat before pain pierced my inner ear, my skin, my face.

We watched smoke rise from a maternity hospital. When we arrived, emergency workers were still pulling bloodied pregnant women from the ruins.

Our batteries were almost out of juice, and we had no connection to send the images. Curfew was minutes away. A police officer overheard us talking about how to get news of the hospital bombing out.

"This will change the course of the war," he said. He took us to a power source and an internet connection.

We had recorded so many dead people and dead children, an endless line. I didn't understand why he thought still more deaths could change anything.

I was wrong.

In the dark, we sent the images by lining up three mobile phones with the video file split into three parts to speed the process up. It took hours, well beyond curfew. The shelling continued, but the officers assigned to escort us through the city waited patiently.

Then our link to the world outside Mariupol was again severed.

We went back to an empty hotel basement with an aquarium now filled with dead goldfish. In our isolation, we knew nothing about a growing Russian disinformation campaign to discredit our work.

The Russian Embassy in London put out two tweets calling the AP photos fake and claiming a pregnant woman was an actress. The Russian ambassador held up copies of the photos at a U.N. Security Council meeting and repeated lies about the attack on the maternity hospital.

In the meantime, in Mariupol, we were inundated with people asking us for the latest news from the war. So many people came to me and said, please film me so my family outside the city will know I'm alive.

By this time, no Ukrainian radio or TV signal was working in Mariupol. The only radio you could catch broadcast twisted Russian lies — that Ukrainians were holding Mariupol hostage, shooting at buildings, developing chemical weapons. The propaganda was so strong that some people we talked to believed it despite the evidence of their own eyes.

The message was constantly repeated, in Soviet style: Mariupol is surrounded. Surrender your weapons.

On March 11, in a brief call without details, our editor asked if we could find the women who survived the maternity hospital airstrike to prove their existence. I realized the footage must have been powerful enough to provoke a response from the Russian government.

We found them at a hospital on the front line, some with babies and others in labor. We also learned that one woman had lost her baby and then her own life.

We went up to the 7th floor to send the video from the tenuous Internet link. From there, I watched as tank after tank rolled up alongside the hospital compound, each marked with the letter Z that had become the Russian emblem for the war.

We were surrounded: Dozens of doctors, hundreds of patients, and us.

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The Ukrainian soldiers who had been protecting the hospital had vanished. And the path to our van, with our food, water and equipment, was covered by a Russian sniper who had already struck a medic venturing outside.

Hours passed in darkness, as we listened to the explosions outside. That's when the soldiers came to get us, shouting in Ukrainian.

It didn't feel like a rescue. It felt like we were just being moved from one danger to another. By this time, nowhere in Mariupol was safe, and there was no relief. You could die at any moment.

I felt amazingly grateful to the soldiers, but also numb. And ashamed that I was leaving.

We crammed into a Hyundai with a family of three and pulled into a 5-kilometer-long traffic jam out of the city. Around 30,000 people made it out of Mariupol that day — so many that Russian soldiers had no time to look closely into cars with windows covered with flapping bits of plastic.

People were nervous. They were fighting, screaming at each other. Every minute there was an airplane or airstrike. The ground shook.

We crossed 15 Russian checkpoints. At each, the mother sitting in the front of our car would pray furiously, loud enough for us to hear.

As we drove through them — the third, the tenth, the 15th, all manned with soldiers with heavy weapons — my hopes that Mariupol was going to survive were fading. I understood that just to reach the city, the Ukrainian army would have to break through so much ground. And it wasn't going to happen.

At sunset, we came to a bridge destroyed by the Ukrainians to stop the Russian advance. A Red Cross convoy of about 20 cars was stuck there already. We all turned off the road together into fields and back lanes.

The guards at checkpoint No. 15 spoke Russian in the rough accent of the Caucasus. They ordered the whole convoy to cut the headlights to conceal the arms and equipment parked on the roadside. I could barely make out the white Z painted on the vehicles.

As we pulled up to the sixteenth checkpoint, we heard voices. Ukrainian voices. I felt an overwhelming relief. The mother in the front of the car burst into tears. We were out.

We were the last journalists in Mariupol. Now there are none.

We are still flooded by messages from people wanting to learn the fate of loved ones we photographed and filmed. They write to us desperately and intimately, as though we are not strangers, as though we can help them.

When a Russian airstrike hit a theater where hundreds of people had taken shelter late last week, I could pinpoint exactly where we should go to learn about survivors, to hear firsthand what it was like to be trapped for endless hours beneath piles of rubble. I know that building and the destroyed homes around it. I know people who are trapped underneath it.

And on Sunday, Ukrainian authorities said Russia had bombed an art school with about 400 people in it in Mariupol.

But we can no longer get there.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Masks return to some Chicago schools
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/mask-mandate-returns-to-six-chicago-public-schools-classrooms-amid-covid-19-spike/
GIST	<p>CHICAGO — Brenna O'Brien, a parent of a second grader and a fourth grader at Chicago's John C. Coonley Elementary School, wasn't sure over the weekend what she's going to do on Monday when her kids were supposed to be back in their classrooms.</p> <p>They'd lost four days of instruction due to illness.</p> <p>"I've repeatedly tested them — we've done PCR tests — and it's just repeatedly been negative," she said Saturday evening after receiving an email from Coonley's principal, Brennen Humphrey, with news that more than one person in her fourth grader's homeroom tested positive for COVID-19.</p>

The email said, “If you are receiving this message, the Chicago Department of Public Health and CPS are requiring your child in (that homeroom) to wear a mask for 10 days from their last potential exposure, or through March 24, 2022.”

Six Coonley classrooms have reverted to universal masking, a Chicago Public Schools spokesperson confirmed, amid a spike in cases at the school.

The pivot back to required masking in the Coonley classrooms is apparently the first in CPS since it [dropped its universal mask mandate](#) a week ago, though it continues to recommend masks. After announcing that shift, CPS later clarified that masks would still be required in certain circumstances, such as when someone is exposed to a person with COVID-19.

“I’m assuming if you come from this home room, you have to wear your mask throughout the entire school building, and there might be other parents that don’t like that. I am curious to see what’s going to happen next. “Are there going to be parents that try to fight that?” said O’Brien, an activist and writer who has been critical of CPS’ handling of the pandemic and has backed parent “sick-outs” to seek more COVID-19 safety measures in schools.

O’Brien said she’s been following [data on cases in the district](#) and that, coupled with [reports of waning vaccination effectiveness for children](#) ages five to 11, has her concerned about how much farther cases will spread this week. There are 448 students in quarantine districtwide as of Sunday, including 29 students at Coonley Elementary, per the CPS [COVID data tracker](#). The school has had 40 positive cases since the start of March.

“It’s such an easy thing to wear a mask on your face and the benefit is so great. We’re trying to stop a pandemic,” said O’Brien, who later confirmed she did decide to send her children to school Monday.

“Take it off when you get home. Take it off when you’re at the park. Why are we fighting so hard for our children who are like 30 a room to not wear masks? It does not make sense to me.”

The Chicago Teachers Union has also fought the end of universal masking, saying it’s a breach of a safety agreement forged after a January standoff that prompted the cancellation of five days of classes. The state’s Educational Labor Relations Board last week [narrowly declined the CTU’s request](#) for an emergency injunction as the union’s complaint is considered.

But many parents had pushed for and have welcomed the end of CPS’ mask mandate; some participated in a lawsuit that prompted school systems around the state to ditch the requirement.

In response to questions about Coonley, a CPS spokesperson released a statement Saturday saying the district is “monitoring case numbers closely, along with the CDPH, and last week, increased our voluntary on-site COVID-19 testing at Coonley from one to two days. We will continue to keep the school community informed of any new information.”

The statement also said CPS “has made the health and safety of our students and staff our highest priority since the onset of the pandemic. Every health and safety measure implemented has been in accordance with the guidance of the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).”

O’Brien, of Lincoln Square, said she feels 80% of parents fall in the middle of the mask mandate debate and are not strongly for or against it.

“The majority of parents will just go with the message that they’re being told and right now the message from the district, the state, the White House is ease up and be mask optional, even though many medical professionals see the next wave coming,” O’Brien said. “I’m hoping we’ll make it to summer and be OK. But, I really don’t know.”

	<p>The school district cited a decline in cases and test positivity as reasons why it made masks optional for students and staff members even as it faces opposition from the teachers union. A hearing on the CTU complaint has been set for June, around the time the school year will end. The union safety deal is set to expire in August.</p> <p>Chicago Public Schools — the largest school district in Illinois, with about 330,000 students — was one of the last locally to transition to a mask-optional policy even as Chicago lifted its mandate for most indoor spaces and the statewide school mask requirement ended amid new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 L&I cites Amazon 'willful serious violation'
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/kent/amazon-fined-for-willful-serious-violation-unsafe-work-conditions-kent/281-f98bb1fa-79ea-46bd-be0d-864f7098f7a6
GIST	<p>KENT, Wash. — Amazon was fined \$60,000 for "knowingly putting workers at risk of injury" at a Kent fulfillment center, according to the Washington Department of Labor & Industries.</p> <p>L&I ergonomists found that workers were required to perform repetitive, physical work like twisting, lifting, and carrying at "such a fast pace" that it increased the risk of injury.</p> <p>The tasks "have caused, and are likely to continue to cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) of the low back," according to an L&I inspection.</p> <p>The infraction is classified as a "willful serious violation" due to three similar violations the company committed at two other Washington fulfillment centers.</p> <p>"The company is aware of these hazards," L&I wrote in a statement. "The company has not yet made necessary changes to improve workplace safety and has consistently denied the association between pace of work and injury rates."</p> <p>An Amazon representative argued L&I's report is not accurate.</p> <p>"We strongly disagree with L&I's claims and don't believe they are supported by the facts. We intend to appeal the citation," said Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel.</p> <p>In all three of the previous complaints, L&I inspections found a "direct connection" between Amazon's employee monitoring and discipline systems and workplace musculoskeletal disorders.</p> <p>Amazon was requiring workers to perform physical tasks too quickly on two separate occasions at a fulfillment center in DuPont, according to L&I. The company was fined \$7,000 for a violation at the center on May 4, 2021, and again on Jan. 19, 2022.</p> <p>"Employees are repeatedly lifting loads up to 49 pounds by hand to and from locations that require bending, stooping and reaching without the assistance of material handling equipment," L&I found.</p> <p>The company was found not to be following elements of its own ergonomics program that were intended to decrease the risk of workplace injuries at the warehouse. The inspection also found not all employees were trained on the ergonomics program or the exposures, symptoms and consequences of repetitive motion injuries.</p> <p>The company was fined another \$7,000 for a similar violation at a fulfillment center in Sumner in December of 2021. There were 36 reported workplace injuries at the facility since 2019. The warehouse had an MSD injury rate two to two-and-a-half times higher than the warehousing industry average, according to L&I.</p>

	<p>An inspection found "The pace of work also makes it impractical for workers to follow Amazon's safety training, including safe lifting methods and setting the brakes on carts while loading and unloading them."</p> <p>Amazon has active appeals for its three previous violations, according to L&I. The company has 15 days to appeal the most recent violation.</p> <p>The inspection of the Kent facility also found the company failed to notify L&I when 10 or more employees tested positive for COVID-19 at the fulfillment center on two separate occasions. However, the department said the situation was "not believed to exist any longer."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Growing homeless crisis at SEA airport
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/homeless/seatac-airport-homeless-crime/281-337fc8b2-5293-4b10-8668-15142ee5e48f
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. — Officials at Sea-Tac Airport are hoping a new pilot program will help curb the homeless crisis that's been growing inside.</p> <p>The Port of Seattle Police Department (POSPD) says before the pandemic, homeless people tended to seek shelter near baggage claim and mostly at night.</p> <p>Now they're moving to other nonsecure areas like ticketing and in public restrooms causing public safety concerns for police.</p> <p>"We have seen substance abuse in the airport sometimes in the open, sometimes in our restrooms, there have been some assaults," said officer Michelle Bregel with the POSPD.</p> <p>The rise in crime inside the airport is impacting travelers as well.</p> <p>"It makes you feel a little worry, makes you feel a little more alert," said Tacoma resident Thupten Tsering.</p> <p>The new Sea Cares program turns the airport crisis coordinator role into a full-time job held by Bregel who has a background and passion for social service issues.</p> <p>The goal is to offer people living at the airport help, shelter referrals and sometimes a case manager.</p> <p>"I think that there has been an increase in safety concerns, especially with crimes associated with that population. But not everyone who comes to the airport to use it as emergency shelter commits crimes," said Bregel.</p> <p>While many people refuse Bregel's offers for help, the program has seen some initial success.</p> <p>Since last May, 87 of the 127 contacts made resulted in some sort of social services referral.</p> <p>Back in early March, Bregal said the program helped reunite a woman who had been living at the airport with her family out of state. The woman had been arrested several times.</p> <p>"It makes me feel good, but also realizing how many more people need help," said Bregel.</p> <p>The next phase in the program involves bringing in mental health professionals to assist officers when they approach those in need.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 'Driver report card' signs in Seattle
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SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/seattle-driver-report-card-signs/281-0d86f039-8a2a-45f4-8ee4-0348c60f829f
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle began rolling out what are being called "driver report cards" at busy intersections throughout the city.</p> <p>The signs will be installed at 13 intersections with marked and unmarked crosswalks. They are part of a \$350,000 public education and awareness campaign being rolled out over the next two years.</p> <p>The first two signs were installed at intersections in the High Point neighborhood of West Seattle at 34th Avenue SW and SW Morgan Street and Sylvan Way SW and SW Sylvan Heights Drive. While observing the behavior of drivers of 25 vehicles recently, the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) reports just under half of the drivers stopped at a painted crosswalk and no drivers stopped at an unpainted crosswalk.</p> <p>Washington state law specifies drivers must stop for pedestrians at nearly all intersections, whether there is a painted crosswalk or not, unless a sign states people are not allowed to cross the street.</p> <p>An informal survey of 1,000 people in Seattle done by SDOT showed 70% of drivers said they stop for pedestrians at painted crosswalks. During observations, however, fewer than 20% of drivers stopped for pedestrians, according to SDOT. When it comes to unmarked crosswalks, fewer than 40% of respondents said they stop for pedestrians.</p> <p>"Clearly, we have significant work to do to make sure everyone knows and obeys the law," SDOT wrote on its blog.</p> <p>The report card signs are based on a project done in St. Paul, Minnesota. The percentage of drivers who stop for pedestrians will be tallied and posted on the signs, along with the record percentage.</p> <p>The signs will be installed in Rainier Beach, followed by other neighborhoods around the city. All initial locations will be within the attendance area of schools with high proportions of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and high proportions of students of color, according to SDOT.</p> <p>SDOT will also compare the percentage of drivers who stop for white pedestrians to the percentages of those who stop for people of color. Research, according to SDOT, shows white pedestrians spend less time waiting to cross at crosswalks.</p> <p>"This is based on our objective of centering safety investments in communities who have been most harmed through public disinvestment," SDOT wrote.</p> <p>The signs will be posted for about six weeks. The program will then be assessed and the data will be used to help design the larger public education campaign.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Pierce Co. \$4M settlement in Ellis' death
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/settlement-reached-with-family-manuel-ellis/MUQ45OSVHNCNXG4V4334NIYWME/
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — The family of Manuel Ellis agreed to settle a lawsuit against Pierce County for more than \$4 million Monday, according to an attorney representing the family.</p> <p>Ellis, a 33-year-old Black man, died on March 3, 2020, just weeks before George Floyd's death triggered a nationwide reckoning on race and policing.</p> <p>Ellis died after being tazed, tackled and punched by three Tacoma police officers.</p> <p>He repeatedly told the officers he couldn't breathe as he was restrained.</p>

	<p>Ellis' family filed a federal lawsuit over his death in September of last year.</p> <p>“This proposed settlement will bring the county’s involvement with this lawsuit to a close,” said Adam Faber, the communications manager for the Pierce County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. “We recognize that the family and friends of Manuel Ellis are grieving, and we hope this settlement will give them some measure of closure.”</p> <p>The family has also filed a lawsuit against the city of Tacoma, which is pending.</p> <p>Three Tacoma police officers are facing criminal charges related to their involvement in Ellis’ death.</p> <p>The Pierce County council is set to vote on the settlement Tuesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 EU top diplomat: Russia guilty war crimes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/21/eu-foreign-policy-chief-accuses-kremlin-war-crimes/
GIST	<p>The European Union’s top diplomat on Monday said Russia is guilty of “massive war crimes” in its siege of the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, echoing the words of President Biden that have infuriated the Kremlin.</p> <p>“What’s happening now in Mariupol is a massive war crime, destroying everything, bombarding and killing everybody,” Josep Borrell, the European Union foreign policy chief, told a gathering of the 27-nation bloc’s foreign ministers in Brussels Monday morning.</p> <p>Mariupol has become a focus of the war as Russian forces attempt to capture their first significant city nearly a month into their invasion.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials and local residents describe heavy shelling of civilian sites — including a theater and an art school being used by local children as a bomb shelter — and public buildings as Russian forces have issued an ultimatum for the surrounded city on the Sea of Azov to surrender.</p> <p>Mr. Biden said last week he considers Russian President Vladimir Putin a “war criminal” for authorizing the invasion and the conduct of Russian troops, a remark that was immediately rejected by Mr. Putin’s aides.</p> <p>Administration officials said Mr. Biden was “speaking from the heart” and not issuing a formal policy, but added that the U.S. government was already working with private rights groups to document Russian military operations for a possible war crimes investigation down the road.</p> <p>The Kremlin was still seething about Mr. Biden’s comments Monday. The Russian Foreign Ministry summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan Monday to complain about the “war criminal” comment and warn it had pushed bilateral relations to the brink of collapse, the Reuters news agency reported.</p> <p>“Such statements from the American president, unworthy of a statesman of such high rank, put Russian-American relations on the verge of rupture,” the ministry said in a statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 US sending Soviet systems to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sending-soviet-air-defense-systems-it-secretly-acquired-to-ukraine-11647878422
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—The U.S. is sending some of the Soviet-made air defense equipment it secretly acquired decades ago to bolster the Ukrainian military as it seeks to fend off Russian air and missile attacks, U.S. officials said.</p>

The systems, which one U.S. official said include the SA-8, are decades old and were obtained by the U.S. so it could examine the technology used by the Russian military and which Moscow has exported around the world.

The weapons are familiar to Ukraine's military, which inherited this type of equipment following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The Pentagon declined to comment on the U.S. decision to reach into its little-known arsenal of Soviet weapons, which comes as the Biden administration is mounting a major push to expand [Ukraine's air defense capabilities](#).

The U.S. over the decades has acquired a small number of Soviet missile defense systems so that they could be examined by U.S. intelligence experts and help with training American forces.

The secretive efforts received public attention in 1994 when a massive Soviet-made transport plane was observed at the Huntsville airport within sight of a major highway. It was later disclosed that the plane was carrying an S-300 air defense system that the U.S. had acquired in Belarus as part of a clandestine project involving a Pentagon contractor that cost \$100 million, according to a former official involved in the mission.

Some of the Soviet-style weapons have been kept at the Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, which its website notes serves as "the Army's center for missile and rocket programs." At least some of what the U.S. sent was from that base, said officials, who added that C-17s recently flew to a nearby airfield at Huntsville, Alabama.

The S-300 from Belarus wasn't among the systems that are being sent to Ukraine, one U.S. official said.

The annual government spending bill recently passed by Congress and signed into law by President Biden includes language that authorizes the administration to transfer to the Ukrainian military and to North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners aircraft, ammunition, vehicles, and other equipment that is either already overseas or in existing stockpiles.

Staffers with Sen. Joni Ernst (R., Iowa), who advocated for the language, said Soviet-era air defense systems would be covered by the new legislation. Congress was notified about the U.S. decision, officials said.

Ukraine already possesses some Russian air defense systems, including the S-300. It needs more such systems, however, that can operate at medium and long range to blunt Russia's aircraft and missile attacks. The shoulder-fired Stinger missiles that the U.S. and NATO nations are providing to Ukraine are only effective against helicopters and low-flying aircraft.

The U.S. is hoping that the provision of additional air defenses will enable Ukraine to create a de facto no-fly zone, since the U.S. and its NATO allies have rebuffed Ukraine's appeals that the alliance establish one. Such a step, Biden administration officials have said, could lead to a direct confrontation between the U.S.-led alliance and Russian forces, which it is determined to avoid.

Mr. Biden is traveling to Brussels this week for a NATO summit to discuss "ongoing deterrence and defense efforts" for Ukraine, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said. Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also have visited the eastern bloc to discuss ways to bolster Ukraine's defensive weapons.

"We are continuing to work with our allies and key partners to surge new assistance, including Soviet- or Russian-origin anti-aircraft systems and the necessary ammunition to employ them, every day to Ukraine," a U.S. official said.

	<p>Mr. Austin last week visited Slovakia to explore if the country would send an S-300 from its arsenal. Slovakia has said that it would do so if the U.S. would provide it with a replacement, but such an arrangement has yet to be agreed.</p> <p>American-made weapons such as the Patriot air defense system are in short supply and require American military personnel or months of U.S. training to operate. German and Dutch Patriot units are being sent to Slovakia as a stopgap, those governments have said.</p> <p>“We’ve been in discussion” with the U.S., Slovakia Minister of Defense Jaroslav Nad’ told reporters during a joint press conference with Mr. Austin on Thursday. “Should there be a situation that we have a proper replacement or that we have a capability guaranteed for a certain period of time, then we would be willing to discuss the future of [the] S-300 system.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Agricultural giants stay in Russia
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/agriculture-giants-stay-in-russia-despite-calls-to-exit-over-ukraine-war-11647860581
GIST	<p>The world’s largest agricultural companies are continuing to sell seeds and handle crops in Russia, despite pressure to sever ties following the invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Companies including Cargill Inc., Bayer AG and Archer Daniels Midland Co. say humanitarian concerns over food availability for Russian citizens and other countries justify the companies’ continued operation in Russia, while Western oil companies, fast-food chains and other companies have pulled out or paused operations there.</p> <p>Advocacy groups and employees of some agricultural companies have urged executives of businesses still operating in Russia to pull back further, however, and last week Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for continued pressure on Western companies to exit Russia.</p> <p>Companies in other industries, like drugs and consumer products, have also cited humanitarian grounds for their decisions to keep operating certain parts of their business in Russia. Those include Johnson & Johnson and AmerisourceBergen Corp., which said it has stopped doing new business in Russia, though it will keep distributing certain cancer drugs and finish clinical trials.</p> <p>Agricultural companies’ ongoing operations in Russia could have broader effects on global food supplies. Russia’s war in Ukraine involves two of the world’s major grain-producing powers, upending a region that has become increasingly critical to feeding a growing and more affluent global population. A dent in Russian exports of food commodities such as wheat, on top of the likelihood of a diminished harvest in Ukraine, could lead to serious food shortages around the world, analysts said.</p> <p>“It’s creating quite an angst in the coming production cycle,” said Bill Biedermann, the Tennessee-based co-founder of AgMarket.net, a commodity brokerage and agricultural consulting company. “If it doesn’t perform, there’s only a couple times in recent history I can think where world food supplies would be this critical.”</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has helped send wheat prices more than 30% higher over the past month. While sanctions haven’t directly targeted Russian food exports and ports in the country are operating, importers face high insurance costs to book cargoes from there, said Andrey Sizov, managing director of SovEcon, a research firm focused on Black Sea grain markets.</p> <p>If crop suppliers pull out of Russia and the country cuts its production, Russia will likely have enough grain to feed itself, Mr. Sizov said, but not necessarily other countries.</p> <p>“That’s a problem for Russia but a bigger problem for food importers all over the world,” he said.</p>

Other factors are likely to cut into wheat production, analysts said. Dry weather [in South America is hurting crop production](#) in the region. In the U.S., the Agriculture Department said earlier this month that it expects farmers to plant only slightly more wheat than last year, when the fewest acres were sown in more than a century. Lower U.S. yields are anticipated because of continuing drought in the West and Northern Plains.

Advocacy groups say [Russia's war](#) requires a powerful message and agriculture companies need to do their part. Some Ukrainian and U.S. environmental and agricultural organizations penned a letter last week pressing Cargill to exit Russia completely.

"Doing business with and paying taxes to President Putin's government is fueling Russia's war machine," the letter said.

A Cargill spokeswoman pointed to the potential food-security implications outlined by the World Food Program, a United Nations agency, when responding to why the company is keeping essential food operations going. The U.N. agency notes the conflict could exacerbate food inflation and hunger in some of the world's poorest countries.

Speaking to Congress on Wednesday, [Mr. Zelensky asked lawmakers](#) to encourage companies from their home states to stop doing business in Russia. He also called on Washington to ban the import of all Russian goods.

Minnesota-based food and agriculture giant Cargill, which employs roughly 2,500 people in Russia and began supplying grain to the Soviet Union in 1964, said earlier this month that it plans to continue running its food and animal feed facilities there, though it will scale back some operations and halt further investments.

"Food is a basic human right and should never be used as a weapon," the company said, adding that the region supplies ingredients for bread, infant formula and breakfast cereal, among other staples.

Pesticide and crop seed maker Syngenta, which has a more than \$1 billion business in the Ukraine and Russia region, continues to supply seeds and chemicals to Russian farmers to mitigate a potential global food shortage, according to people familiar with the matter.

Other companies also have said they plan to continue operating in Russia while limiting certain operations and new development. They include commodities traders ADM, Bunge Ltd. and Viterro, the grain business of commodities giant Glencore PLC.

Bayer said it could withhold seeds for crops in Russia next year if the war in Ukraine continues. The German seed and pesticide giant said it has already provided essential agricultural supplies to Russian farmers for this year's planting but would monitor the political situation and decide about supplies for 2023 and beyond at a later stage.

Bayer acknowledged calls to suspend sales and services in Russia, but said withholding agricultural products would add to the war's human toll.

Some employees of big agriculture companies have pushed internally for the companies to take a tougher stance, according to people familiar with the matter, including sending messages to company leaders about pulling out of Russia completely.

Some large agriculture companies and grain traders have been communicating with each other to align their stances that pulling out of Russia will make the world's food supply tighter, according to people familiar with the matter. The companies have also been working together on the logistics of moving products in and crop exports out of the area as well as working with governments—including Russia—on humanitarian efforts, the people said.

	<p>Agricultural analysts said the global food supply will be affected by the war. Up to 13 million people around the world could be pushed into hunger because of the spike in food prices and disruptions in supplies that result from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations said. The impact will likely be felt most by import-dependent and low-income countries relying on Russian grain, according to analysts and agriculture industry officials.</p> <p>Monika Tothova, an economist with the FAO, said Russian farmers would struggle if large Western agribusinesses pulled out of the country. There are few major players in the agriculture sector, she said, and substitutes for Western-supplied seed and chemicals may not be readily available.</p> <p>"If you're a farmer in the region, you have few options," she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 DOH: 1,446,845 cases, 12,355 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article259633939.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 214 new COVID-19 cases Monday.</p> <p>As of Monday, the state's preliminary death tally was 12,355.</p> <p>The confirmed death tally as of March 4 was 12,240. The state reported 451 cases Sunday and 1,012 cases Saturday.</p> <p>The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,446,845 cases on Monday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Court strikes down part Seattle eviction law
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/court-strikes-down-part-of-seattle-law-meant-to-help-tenants-avoid-eviction-in-wake-of-pandemic/
GIST	<p>The Washington State Court of Appeals has struck down a city policy meant to reduce evictions after the end of Seattle's eviction moratorium.</p> <p>An ordinance the Seattle City Council passed in May 2020 said tenants who fell behind on rent and faced eviction could, for six months following the end of the moratorium, assert a defense in court if they self-certified that they suffered financial hardship and couldn't pay the rent.</p> <p>City leaders pointed to the rule as one key to the city's emergence from a nearly two-year ban on almost all evictions. As they allowed the eviction moratorium to expire Feb. 28, Mayor Bruce Harrell and Seattle City Council members cited a suite of city tenant protections including the six-month rule as ways of helping vulnerable tenants stay housed as evictions resumed.</p> <p>In a written decision Monday, the Court of Appeals upheld other city protections, but said the six-month eviction defense "deprives the landlords of their property interest without due process by not affording them the opportunity to test the veracity of a tenant's self-certification of financial hardship."</p> <p>The lawsuit also challenged the city's ban on evictions during winter months and a law allowing tenants to repay pandemic debt in installments. A King County Superior Court judge last year upheld all but one small portion of the laws. The Court of Appeals affirmed that lower court ruling but added the decision against the six-month rule.</p> <p>The Rental Housing Association of Washington, which represents landlords and sued the city over the rental regulations, said in a statement, "We are grateful for the Court's decision, which stops the cycle of debt for housing providers and residents trapped in Seattle's ongoing COVID-19 eviction ban."</p>

The city attorney's office did not immediately say whether it plans to seek a review of the case from the state's highest court.

"We are assessing the implications of today's ruling and exploring our options — including whether to seek review by the Supreme Court," spokesperson Anthony Derrick said.

The Rental Housing Association said it would "continue to examine our issues with Seattle's winter eviction ban."

Landlords had argued that state law preempted Seattle's protections, but the court found that because a city eviction limit such as the winter ban or the six-month rule "merely regulates the timing of the eviction," the local rules were allowed.

The court upheld the winter eviction ban but struck down the six-month rule because of a procedural difference.

The city's ban on winter evictions requires tenants not make more than the median income in the Seattle area. The court found that landlords would have the right to a hearing to challenge "the factual veracity of the tenant's claimed income level" and wrote that "nothing prevents the landlord from claiming that a tenant has the ability to pay rent and has simply chosen not to do so."

But the six-month rule allows tenants to submit a self-certification and "does not allow a landlord to challenge the veracity of the tenant's certification," the court wrote.

"The inability to challenge the tenant's self-certification creates the unnecessary risk that a court will grant a reprieve from eviction to a tenant who does not financially need it," the ruling says.

The Housing Justice Project, which represents tenants facing eviction, had expected landlords to be able to challenge the self-certifications, even though that wasn't spelled out explicitly in the law, said Senior Managing Attorney Edmund Witter.

Witter said he wasn't aware of a client using the six-month rule since the moratorium expired less than a month ago, but described it as an important stopgap for tenants who face eviction while waiting to hear whether they will receive King County rent assistance.

"This was the one saving grace people had during that time," he said.

In response to the ruling, the City Council could pursue a change to the law.

Councilmember Kshama Sawant said during a meeting Monday her office had asked council staff to "prepare legislation to correct any legal challenge." Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda wrote on Twitter she would work with other council members "to make sure tenants in Seattle have protections needed to stay in their homes."

Attorneys have 20 days to file a motion for reconsideration and 30 days to seek a review by the state Supreme Court, the court told attorneys for the city in a letter Monday.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Student group demands mask mandate
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/seattle-students-walk-out-of-school-demand-mask-mandates-be-reinstated/
GIST	More than 100 Seattle Public Schools students walked out of class Monday morning to protest the district's decision to end the requirement that students and staff wear masks.

Many of those students rallied at district headquarters, the John Stanford Center, to ask Superintendent Brent Jones to reinstate the mask mandate districtwide. Mask requirements for Seattle and most other districts in the state [ended a week ago](#).

“It’s absolutely maddening we have to take time away from our education to fight for safety and health,” said Marigold Wong, a sophomore at Franklin High School.

The newly formed [Seattle Student Union](#), a group of student activists that organized the rally, have been [demanding stronger safety protocols](#) since January, including district-issued high-quality masks. The group has been threatening a walkout since Gov. Jay Inslee announced plans to end mask requirements in schools, child care facilities, and most other businesses.

The student union sent the School Board and Jones a letter last week asking that mask requirements continue, or they would take action. Students from schools around the district showed up, including from Franklin, Chief Sealth International, Roosevelt, Lincoln, Nova and Center high schools.

“Every time we try to get hasty and toss our masks off, we have another spike and another thousand people die,” said Eridon Stewart, a 17-year-old senior at Nova High, who spoke at the rally. Stewart said her mother has asthma, and could die if she caught the virus. Other students also talked about the threat COVID-19 poses to family members who are immunocompromised.

Aderyn Kee, a sophomore at Roosevelt High, said she has three family members who have lost their lives to COVID-19. Wearing masks could prevent more from dying, she said.

Although masks are optional, most students at Franklin High have been wearing them, Wong said. But up north at Roosevelt, the majority of students aren’t wearing masks, Kee said.

Luna Crone-Barón said her dad survived cancer, and now that masks aren’t required she and her younger brother are putting him at risk every day.

“It is not fair that I have a teacher who is immunocompromised and has to take care of her elderly grandmother and now she has to be scared every single day coming into the building to teach us and nurture us and do what she loves,” the sophomore at the Center School said. “That is injustice.”

Jones’ announcement that masks were optional also rattled the teachers union, which has been pushing back on the district’s decision as well. The student walkout follows [a rally the Seattle Education Association held Friday](#). The teachers union called on the district to fix strained relationships by including teachers and students in decision-making.

SEA claims the district violated a memorandum of understanding when mask requirements ended without bargaining. Union officials said the district had promised to bargain over it first.

In a statement released Monday and signed by Bev Redmond, assistant superintendent of public affairs, the district noted that its decision to end the mask requirement aligns with recent guidance from the state Department of Health and Public Health – Seattle & King County. “We also realize that Gov. Jay Inslee’s March 12 lifting of the masking mandate came fast for some and without an extended time for adjustment,” the statement read. “Understandably, there are many different beliefs, opinions, reasons, and comfort levels around this decision.”

The statement said the district “supports student voice” and will help students “with reassurance, empathy, and respect for the personal choice to mask or not.” The students who walked out are expected to be marked with an unexcused absence for missing class.

The union is standing in solidarity with students who are walking out.

	<p>“We watched as students in our classrooms grappled with the implications of this change on their lives and the lives of their families and friends who are immunocompromised or unvaccinated,” said a statement from SEA. “Students were not given any voice in this change or how it would be implemented.”</p> <p>Students need to be listened to, and administrators and board members should address their demands, SEA officials said.</p> <p>“What our students are feeling is a direct result of how our system is failing,” the statement said.</p> <p>At the close of the rally, all of the students turned to face the front of the building so Jones and other administrators could hear them. They chanted: “What do we want? Mask mandates. When do we want it? Now.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 China media: no survivors in plane crash
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/state-media-no-survivors-found-in-china-eastern-plane-crash/
GIST	<p>KUNMING, China (AP) — No survivors have been found as rescuers on Tuesday searched the scattered wreckage of a China Eastern plane carrying 132 people that crashed a day earlier on a wooded mountainside in China’s worst air disaster in more than a decade.</p> <p>“Wreckage of the plane was found at the scene, but up until now, none of those aboard the plane with whom contact was lost have been found,” state broadcaster CCTV said, more than 20 hours after the Monday afternoon crash.</p> <p>The Boeing 737-800 crashed near the city of Wuzhou in the Guangxi region while flying from Kunming in the southwestern province of Yunnan to the industrial center of Guangzhou along the east coast. It ignited a fire big enough to be seen on NASA satellite images.</p> <p>The crash created a deep pit in the mountainside, the official Xinhua News Agency reported, citing rescuers. The report said drones and a manual search would be used to try to find the black boxes, which hold the flight data and cockpit voice recorders essential to crash investigations.</p> <p>A base of operations was set up near the crash site with rescue vehicles, ambulances and an emergency power supply truck parked in the narrow space. Soldiers in camouflage joined helmeted rescue workers in orange jump suits in combing the charred crash site and surrounding heavily dense vegetation.</p> <p>The steepness of the slope made positioning of heavy equipment difficult, although with few large pieces of the aircraft remaining, there appeared little need for their use.</p> <p>China Eastern Flight 5735 was flying at 29,000 feet (8,840 meters) when it entered a steep, fast dive around 2:20 p.m. local time, according to data from FlightRadar24.com. The plane plunged to 7,400 feet (2,255 meters) before briefly regaining about 1,200 feet (370 meters) in altitude, then dove again. The plane stopped transmitting data 96 seconds after starting to dive.</p> <p>The plane was carrying 123 passengers and nine crew members, the Civil Aviation Administration of China said. It was about an hour into the flight, and nearing the point at which it would begin descending into Guangzhou, when it pitched downward.</p> <p>Chinese President Xi Jinping called for an “all-out” rescue operation, as well as for an investigation into the crash and to ensure complete civil aviation safety.</p> <p>At a hotel near the Kunming airport where the plane took off, about a dozen people, some in jackets identifying them as members of China’s aviation agency, huddled around tables and read documents. Police and security guards at an airline office near the airport ordered journalists to leave.</p>

Family members of those on board began gathering at Guangzhou airport, where they were escorted to a reception center manned by employees in full protective gear guarding against the spread of the coronavirus.

At least five hotels with more than 700 rooms have been requisitioned for family members, reports said.

The crash site is remote, accessible only by foot and motorcycle, in Guangxi, a semitropical region of mountains and rivers famed for some of China's most spectacular scenery.

The region lies just east of the agricultural, mining and tourism center of Yunnan province, of which the capital is Kunming, a city of 8.5 million that is a hub for trade with Southeast Asia and the northern end of a high-speed railway to neighboring Laos that opened in December.

Guangzhou to the west is China's traditional foreign trade capital, lying at the heart of export-driven manufacturing industries in the country's southeast that supply the world's smartphones, toys, furniture and other goods and is a hub for a growing Chinese auto industry.

Also known as Canton, the city of 18.5 million is home to the Canton Trade Fair, the world's biggest annual trade show. The Auto City district on Guangzhou's northern outskirts has one of China's biggest state-owned automakers, GAC Group, as well as factories for joint ventures operated by Toyota and Nissan and smaller brands.

All of the more than 100 737-800s in China Eastern's fleet are being grounded, China's Transport Ministry said. With no word on when they could fly again, the grounding could potentially further disrupt domestic air travel already being curtailed as China deals with its largest coronavirus outbreak since the initial peak in early 2020.

Aviation experts said it is unusual to ground an entire fleet of planes unless there is evidence of a problem with the model. China has more 737-800s than any other country — nearly 1,200 — and if identical planes at other Chinese airlines are grounded, it “could have a significant impact on domestic travel,” said aviation consultant IBA.

Boeing 737-800s have been flying since 1998, and Boeing has sold more than 5,100 of them. They have been involved in 22 accidents that damaged the planes beyond repair and killed 612 people, according to data compiled by the Aviation Safety Network, an arm of the Flight Safety Foundation.

“There are thousands of them around the world. It's certainly had an excellent safety record,” the foundation's president, Hassan Shahidi, said of the 737-800.

The plane was not a Boeing 737 Max, the planes that were grounded worldwide for nearly two years after deadly crashes in 2018 and 2019.

China's air-safety record has improved since the 1990s as air travel has grown dramatically with the rise of a burgeoning middle class. Before Monday, the last fatal crash of a Chinese airliner occurred in August 2010, when an Embraer ERJ 190-100 operated by Henan Airlines hit the ground short of the runway in the northeastern city of Yichun and caught fire. It carried 96 people and 44 of them died. Investigators blamed pilot error.

China Eastern's last fatal crash was in November 2004, when a bombardier CRJ-200 plunged into a frozen lake just after takeoff from the Inner Mongolian city of Baotou, killing 53 people on board and two on the ground. Regulators blamed ice that had collected on the wings.

The CAAC and China Eastern both sent officials to the crash site. The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board said a senior investigator was chosen to help, and the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, which certified the 737-800 in the 1990s, said it was ready to help if asked.

Return to Top	<p>Chicago-based Boeing Co. said its experts were prepared to assist investigators, and the NTSB said engine maker CFM, a joint venture between General Electric and France's Safran, would provide technical help on engine issues.</p> <p>Plane crash investigations are usually led by officials in the country where the crash occurred, but they typically include the manufacturer and the investigator or regulator in the manufacturer's home country.</p> <p>Headquartered in Shanghai, China Eastern is one of the country's top three airlines, serving 248 domestic and foreign destinations.</p> <p>The aircraft was delivered to the airliner from Boeing in June 2015 and had been flying for more than six years. China Eastern Airlines uses the Boeing 737-800 as a workhorse of its fleet — the airline has more than 600 planes, and 109 are Boeing 737-800s.</p> <p>The twin-engine, single-aisle Boeing 737 in various versions has been flying for more than 50 years and is one of the world's most popular planes for short- and medium-haul flights.</p> <p>The 737 Max, a later version, was grounded for about 20 months after two crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia killed 346 people. China in December became the last major market to clear the Max to return to service, although Chinese airlines have not yet resumed flying the Max.</p> <p>The deadliest crash involving a Boeing 737-800 came in January 2020, when Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard accidentally shot down a Ukraine International Airlines flight, killing 176 people.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Ukraine war impact on food prices
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/ukraine-war-russia-food-high
GIST	<p>As war continues to ravage Ukraine, Americans, particularly those who live paycheck to paycheck, are beginning to feel the financial squeeze on their food prices from the conflict half a world away.</p> <p>It began with a rapid rise in gas prices. Now, with Russian oil banned in the United States and energy scarcity heightened globally, experts say shoppers can expect their grocery bills to rise in coming months — especially if Ukraine misses its wheat planting season.</p> <p>"It comes an absolutely horrible time for American consumers because we're looking every day at inflation almost reaching 10%," Dan Varroney, a supply chain expert and founder of Potomac Core, told FOX Business. "Last month's figures were close to 8%. And that means that consumers, including those that are living paycheck to paycheck, are going to pay more for food."</p> <p>Russia and Ukraine produce 25% of the global wheat supply, according to the Observatory for Economic Complexity. While neither of these countries export wheat to the U.S. directly, their absence from the global market is expected to strain supply and push prices higher.</p> <p>All of this scarcity, from natural gas and crude oil to wheat and seed oil, will impact the cost of doing business for food manufacturers at home.</p> <p>Varroney, who dove into global supply chain issues during the pandemic in his recent book, said that with the rising cost of inputs, some companies won't have a choice but to raise the cost of their products for the end user. To him, it all comes down to the rising cost of energy at every step of the supply chain.</p> <p>"Everything from getting food from the ground, to producing it, to storing it, to delivering, it all involves energy," Varroney said. "Natural gas is utilized to manufacture those foods. Then when you get past that? And you get into logistics, you've got a store, these food products, so there's gasoline to ship and there's electricity to store."</p>

"It's energy costs that are going to choke consumers at every level as food companies need to stay competitive."

One industry facing particular strain is the baking industry. With wheat as a primary ingredient and natural gas used for large-scale industrial ovens, bakers are grappling with rising costs of doing business.

Robb MacKie, the president and CEO of the American Bakers Association (ABA), said bread makers are starting to feel the pinch of higher demand on their inputs.

"A lot of ingredients come out of Ukraine, particularly wheat, oilseeds, barley and a number of other crops," MacKie told FOX Business. "The challenge is that that [region] is one of the top three wheat growing areas of the world. And if we're taking that out of production, which it looks like if the conflict goes much longer, that is going to happen. That's going to have a significant impact on the price of U.S. and Canadian wheat, which is what U.S. bakers primarily use."

MacKie's organization highlighted several solutions the Biden administration could take to ease costs for producers and ultimately consumers. The ABA is currently lobbying the EPA to put a hold on implementing an increase of food oils into clean diesel products. MacKie said this would help keep food oils available for bakers, decreasing the cost of the input.

The ABA also proposed that the USDA open some conservation reserve lands that could be used to grow wheat and other crops during the global supply shortage. MacKie was careful to note that this proposal does not include the opening of highly sensitive wetland areas.

MacKie also joined a myriad industry and think tank voices asking the Biden administration to open up domestic sources of energy, like natural gas, gasoline and crude oil, which could help ease the energy inflation for producers and consumers alike.

Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy claims America can produce oil and gas in an 'environmentally friendly way' on 'Sunday Night in America.'

"I think that as we look forward, American shoppers should expect that, unfortunately, their grocery bills are going to go up and unfortunately their restaurant bills are going to go up," MacKie said. "And unfortunately, this is going to impact the most vulnerable in our society, many of whom are still feeling the impacts of the pandemic."

He continued: "You just cannot have this type of disruption in the supply chain and inflation on raw ingredients and the energy that we use and other things like packaging without there being some reciprocal cost benefit."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that food prices have already increased by nearly 8% for the previous 12 months as of February 2022. That's the largest 12-month increase since 1981.

The shrinking supply of inputs is expected to threaten the American food production industry's ability to manufacture food. Grocery shelves in America should remain stocked, albeit at higher prices.

"I think that the disruptions due to this war are only going to continue upward pressure on food prices," Caitlin Welsh, the director of the Global Food Security Program at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), told FOX Business. "I don't expect that to happen immediately in the U.S. It could take a couple of months for that to play out. And I don't think that it's going to happen to the same extent in the U.S. as it has in other countries that relied much more on imports to meet their food needs. But I do expect it to have an impact and it will last at least as long as the war lasts."

	<p>While countries in Europe and Africa are facing a direct threat to their wheat supplies due to the war in Ukraine, Welsh said it's impossible to totally isolate the United States from global food and energy markets.</p> <p>"Food markets are globalized so, to a certain extent, it's impossible to avoid the impacts of disruptions like this," Welsh said. "I think that these types of disruptions remind us the extent to which we, you know, the global economy and global agriculture trade is intertwined with the rest of the world."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Arrests: Russia spies scouted Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-russian-spies-scouted-ukraine-house-arrest-kgb
GIST	<p>It is not that his spies are necessarily incompetent. Vladimir Putin apparently just thinks they are.</p> <p>Two members of the FSB, the successor agency to the KGB, who were supposed to have prepped the ground for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are reportedly under house arrest. Colonel-General Sergei Beseda and his deputy apparently dropped the ball. Or are being blamed for an operation that by most accounts is bogged down.</p> <p>Questions are likely being asked. "Why didn't Ukrainians welcome Russian soldiers? Where did the money earmarked for that operation go? Was it unwisely spent or stolen by those in charge of it?" There were no crowds greeting the invading force with flowers, as some in Russia had anticipated.</p> <p>"It never happened, as we know. And so it's also about misusing the funds spent on probably imaginary networks of agents," Andrei Soldatov of the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) tells Fox News. Soldatov is an expert on Russian security services and explains those under arrest are from the Fifth Service of the FSB.</p> <p>"They represent the most sensitive department of the FSB department, which is in charge of espionage in Ukraine. And now it looks like Vladimir Putin finally understood that the intelligence he was given before the invasion was not extremely accurate. And he has started looking around trying to find someone to blame."</p> <p>The Fifth Service, according to Soldatov, is responsible for all former Soviet republics, keeping an eye on them, infiltrating politics to help get pro-Russia people into power or to keep them there. He also says it is not just the Fifth Service but all intelligence services have been living under pressure for some time. Let's not forget those scenes just before the invasion of Ukraine, when Putin convened his Security Council only to publicly humiliate his head of foreign intelligence, the SVR, who stammered through his performance. The Security Council had been at that point "debating" whether or not to recognize the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.</p> <p>Apparently it is not just free-thinkers who have spent recent years living under pressure as screws tightened on freedom of expression.</p> <p>"Russian intelligence agencies have been living in the climate of fear for at least five, six years. Putin started selective repressions back in 2015-2016, and he attacked every section of the Russian society, including the Russian elite, including the FSB. We have governors in jail, we have ministers in jail, but also we have the FSB officers and at least one general in prison. And of course, in this kind of climate, you cannot expect people in the FSB be ready to say something to Putin and he doesn't want to hear," Soldatov said. "He has very strong opinions about Ukraine. He is writing articles. He thinks that he is the best historian on Ukrainian history. And then this kind of climate of fear we already have in our society, even for the FSB people, for the KGB people, it's it became really difficult to tell him something he doesn't want to hear," Soldatov stresses that last point, already made.</p> <p>Then there was the story of Roman Gavrillov, deputy head of the National Guard. Reportedly he was forced into retirement and may be facing criminal charges.</p>

	<p>"He was in charge of special forces of the National Guard, involved in the fighting in Ukraine and the performance of its units they're not extremely impressive," Soldatov tells Fox News. "So probably that is the reason why he was attacked. But what is interesting is that this guy was personally known to Vladimir Putin because before his time in the National Guard, he was part of the personal security detail of Vladimir Putin. So now Putin does not hesitate to attack people he knows personally."</p> <p>Back to the Fifth Service of the FSB. It may be a matter of time before Putin and his deputies start asking them another key question.</p> <p>"This department of the FSB is a foreign intelligence branch is also officially in charge of maintaining official contacts with Western security and intelligence agencies, including the CIA," Soldatov says. "So now lots of people in Moscow ask themselves, why is the US intelligence was so good before the invasion? And they are trying to find who might be the source."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Yemen rebels hit Saudi oil site again
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/satellite-photos-show-yemen-rebels-hit-saudi-oil-83593496
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels this week struck the same oil storage tank in the Saudi Arabian city of Jiddah they had previously hit two years ago, satellite photos show.</p> <p>Satellite photos by Planet Labs PBC, analyzed by The Associated Press on Tuesday, show the damage on Sunday to the North Jiddah Bulk Plant, which sits just southeast of the city's international airport, a crucial hub for Muslim pilgrims heading to Mecca.</p> <p>That same storage tank — owned by the state oil behemoth Saudi Arabian Oil Co., known as Saudi Aramco — was hit by what the Houthis described as a cruise missile in a November 2020 attack.</p> <p>Sunday's attack has renewed questions about the kingdom's ability to defend itself from Houthi fire as a yearslong war in the Arab world's poorest country rages on with no end in sight. It also comes as Saudi Arabia issued an unusually stark warning that it is unable to guarantee its oil production won't be affected by further attacks — which could push global energy prices even higher amid Russia's war on Ukraine.</p> <p>Both Saudi government officials and Aramco did not immediately respond to questions Tuesday.</p> <p>The Houthi attack on Sunday represents one its most-intense barrages of the war, which has seen the kingdom launch punishing airstrikes in Yemen that have been criticized internationally for killing civilians. Among the targets was a petrochemicals complex in Yanbu on the Red Sea coast, which Saudi officials said led to a disruption of production for the world's biggest oil exporter.</p> <p>Another target was the North Jiddah Bulk Plant, which stores diesel, gasoline and jet fuel for use in Jiddah, the kingdom's second-largest city some 285 kilometers (177 miles) southeast of Yanbu on the coast. It accounts for over a quarter of all of Saudi Arabia's supplies and also supplies fuel crucial to running a regional desalination plant.</p> <p>Saudi authorities earlier described the attack as causing a “limited fire in one of the tanks, (which was) brought under control without causing casualties.” The Houthis said they used Quds-2 land-attack cruise missile in the assault.</p> <p>The Planet Labs PBC photos, taken Monday, showed what likely was white, fire-suppressing material surrounding the tank, which appeared damaged on its southern-facing side.</p> <p>At the time of the 2020 attack, the tank, which has a capacity of 500,000 barrels, held diesel fuel, according to a recent report by a U.N. panel of experts examining Yemen's war. Repairing it after the last attack cost Aramco some \$1.5 million.</p>

	<p>The U.N. experts described the facility as a “civilian target,” which the Houthis should have avoided after the 2020 attack.</p> <p>“While the facility also supplies the Saudi military with petroleum products, it is mostly supplying civilian customers,” the panel said. “If the plant had been out of service of a significant period, the impact on the kingdom’s economy as well as on the welfare of the residents of the Western region would likely have been significant.”</p> <p>Cruise missiles and drones remain difficult to defend against, though the U.S. recently sent a significant number of Patriot antimissile interceptors to Saudi Arabia to resupply the kingdom amid the Houthi attacks.</p> <p>In September, the AP reported that the U.S. had removed its own Patriot and THAAD defense systems from Prince Sultan Air Base outside of Riyadh.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	03/21 Anonymous ‘warning shot’ at companies
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/anonymous-hackers-fire-warning-shot-at-companies-refusing-to-pull-out-of-russia/
GIST	<p>Anonymous hackers warned that the next #OpRussia target will be corporations that refuse to pull their business from Russia as one group of hackers decided to try to use their data haul from a Russian company to financially help the people of Ukraine.</p> <p>“We call on all companies that continue to operate in Russia by paying taxes to the budget of the Kremlin’s criminal regime: Pull out of Russia! We give you 48 hours to reflect and withdraw from Russia or else you will be under our target!” a prominent Anonymous account tweeted Sunday.</p> <p>The same account reported Thursday that the #OpRussia cyber offensive started nearly a month ago by the collective was “launching unprecedented attacks on the websites of Russian gov’t. Increasing their capacity at peak times from 500 GB earlier, it is now up to 1 TB. That is, two to three times more powerful than the most serious incidents.”</p> <p>And one hacker who has promised for days a major data dump tweeted that they were first expecting a reply on a ransom request — stressing that if the ransom was paid it would not be lining their pockets but would be donated as “free money for Ukraine.”</p> <p>That same hacker, going by the Twitter handle DepaixPorteur, launched an operation Sunday to print out messages on hijacked printers countering Russian propaganda about the war along with instructions on how to install the Tor browser to evade government censors. Fifteen people working on the project were able to send more than 100,000 copies to printers across Russia in two hours, the account announced.</p> <p>On March 13, DepaixPorteur teased on Twitter that a “huge” data dump was forthcoming “that’s gonna blow Russia away,” adding the following day that they have “hundreds if not thousands of gigabytes of data to compile.” Throughout the #OpRussia cyber campaign, hackers have frequently posted data from their intrusions into government and company systems, ranging from phone lists up to giant troves of sensitive data.</p> <p>On March 18, the hacker tweeted about the effort to extract ransom from the hacked entity: “So we’ve decided we’re going to ransom this Russian company for their data before we dump it, and if they pay, we will donate it to #Ukraine @ukraine’s ethereum address. That way Russian corporations will be paying</p>

Ukraine, to fight themselves... To people who are saying ‘they won’t pay, they have backups’. We don’t care. Money wasn’t our initial intention anyway. We’re happy to dump the data for free. But if they do pay, it’s free money for #Ukraine. Also we’re encrypting their data and deleting backups :)”

“Yes we’re still going to dump the data we’ve been hyping all week. It’s fucking HUGE, but we’re waiting for a ransom response before we dump it. Appreciate your guys patience! Going to need all the help we can translating it after it dumps,” the account tweeted Sunday, adding, “Why would it matter if they pay or not if we plan on dumping it anyway? If they pay, cool free money for #Ukraine, if not then we still dump it as planned.”

The hacker announced the previous weekend that they had conducted penetration testing on 14,000 cameras around Kyiv — because “if we can, the Russians can as well” — and found vulnerabilities in 300. “We’ll bring this to the attention of #Ukraine IT as soon as possible. But it’s a lot better than we were expecting,” they tweeted, adding that they would be moving on to doing pentesting for other major Ukrainian cities’ cameras too.

Anonymous called for a worldwide boycott of Nestle products, claiming attacks on the company’s sites over the past few days — and “that was only a warning shot” — after the company, which has more than 7,000 employees in Russia, said in a March 11 statement that they would “continue to do our utmost to ensure a reliable supply of safe and essential food products for the local people.” Nestle is far from the only company that has decided to keep a foothold in Russia; for example, pizza chain Papa John’s said it would suspend corporate operations in the country but a U.S. franchise operator said 190 stores in Russia would remain open because “at the end of the day, they appreciate a good pizza.”

The Anonymous calls against Nestle grew louder over the weekend. “As the death toll climbs You have been warned and now Breached. Anonymous is holding you responsible for the murder of defenseless children and mothers. Nestle Leave #Russia,” said one tweet.

BlueHornet/AgainstTheWest, hackers who are working with Anonymous, reported Sunday taking down Nestle’s French corporate site. “Seems that they’ve fallen back to their .fr subdomain... Not like that matters. CloudFlare won’t protect you @Nestle,” the group tweeted.

One prominent Anonymous account tweeted footage of the destruction in coastal Mariupol, declaring, “The entire city was destroyed in 20 days by Russian criminals. companies finance this war by sending money to the Putin regime). The world is watching! All organizations that finance #Russia will be targeted by #Anonymous...”

“Leroy Merlin, Auchan, Decathlon deciding not to leave the Russian market, put their profit before solidarity with the victims of the genocide so we will replace the barcodes of their products with invalid prices ... blood money must be stopped,” a video stated, showing sticker labels being printed out with the Anonymous signature and “Free Ukraine” to place over bar codes in the retailers’ stores — and, like other hacker-led information warfare operations in #OpRussia, inviting non-hacker citizens to print out the labels and take part. Photos also showed activists placing stickers advising shoppers of the retailers’ actions on the handles of shopping carts.

Anonymous programmers Squad303 created the 1920.in tool for anybody to send random Russians text messages warning that the people of Russia would suffer as a result of nations’ response to Vladimir Putin’s aggression and that they need to know the truth about his unprovoked war. A week after its launch, non-hackers supporting the #OpRussia initiative had sent more than 7 million text messages. That is now up to more than 30 million messages countering Russian propaganda, and Squad303 has expanded the tool to be able to send emails, WhatsApp messages, and now phone calls to Russians.

“Anonymous is the armed arm of the people of the free world against the Kremlin and its supporters,” Squad303 said in a weekend video encouraging even more everyday concerned citizens to become digital warriors and reach out to Russians. “Operation Russia has become the largest cyber offensive in the

	<p>history of the world. Within a matter of hours, Anonymous shattered the myth of Russia’s cyber warfare power.”</p> <p>“Anonymous is a global tool to provide support to those in need, for each and every one of us – no matter who we are or where we live!” they added. “We don’t need to buy guns! Our weapons are our smartphones!”</p> <p>Russian hackers were furiously trying to attack 1920.in, with Squad303 reporting “dozens” of attacks Saturday. “The Kremlin is afraid of YOU,” the group tweeted. “No matter how many forces and resources they direct against us, YOU are UNSTOPPABLE!”</p> <p>Anonymous, GhostSec, Squad303 and ShdwSEC released a video message to Russian citizens Saturday stressing that “your president is not fighting the Nazis, he has some in his own ministers.”</p> <p>“Don’t you see that your president is building a wall around your nation?” the video asked. “While you all have your attention fixed on this war, you give wildcard to your legislators, handing over your destiny to the executive power... the people have always been stronger.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Ukraine supporters ‘hacking back’
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/while-russian-tanks-attack-ukrainian-supporters-hack-back/
GIST	<p>Until a few weeks ago, Dmytro was a pretty average student.</p> <p>Now the 18-year-old, who The Record is only identifying by first name for his protection, is volunteering to coordinate the defense of his country online from a bomb shelter in Kyiv.</p> <p>The Ukrainian government began recruiting local tech specialists for its so-called “cyber forces” unit even before the latest Russian invasion.</p> <p>Its main purpose was to track and repel attacks in cyberspace, according to Serhii Demediuk, a top Ukrainian cybersecurity official.</p> <p>But it was too late—Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24.</p> <p>And now instead of professionally-trained cybersecurity specialists, Ukraine has turned for help to volunteers with different levels of IT skills organized in official and unofficial groups that can be hard to track — often “hacking back.”</p> <p>“Everyone could join the Telegram channel (of the IT Army),” said Slava Banik, head of the development of e-services at the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, referring to the official version, called the IT Army.</p> <p>People online — some from Ukraine and some from abroad — are all contributing to a radically decentralized cyberwar landscape, where even playing a webgame can be contributing to the digital fight against the Russian invasion.</p> <p>“We have already attracted over 300,000 specialists,” Banik said of the official IT Army efforts.</p> <p>The IT Army’s main method of attack is to flood Russian websites with junk traffic, attempting to knock them offline. This method, known as distributed denial-of-service attacks, are one of the more simple types of digital attacks, and are frequently wielded by hacktivist groups.</p> <p>Many attacks at least appear successful: volunteer hackers temporarily disrupted the work of Russian government websites, online banks, state-owned media, e-commerce platforms and streaming services websites, according to the IT Army’s public channel on the messaging app Telegram.</p>

In response to these attacks, Russia appears to be deploying a defensive technical measure known as geofencing to block access to certain sites it controls, including its military website, from areas outside Russia's sphere of influence, as previously [reported](#) by The Record.

And apart from this official army, there are multiple other groups claiming hacktivist allegiances, encouraging Ukrainians to counter Russian propaganda either by restricting access to its websites (DDoS attacks) or placing anti-war messages on their web pages (defacement attacks).

Some Western officials, however, call this battle "unethical" and fear that hacktivists' attacks could get out of control and hurt ordinary people who are not involved in the war.

Volunteers, for example, may be in violation of local law, and tools being advertised to people wanting to join the front in cyberspace may also actually put them at risk, researchers warn.

Meanwhile, Russia's digital attacks have been less severe than observers expected — perhaps, in part, as the military has focused on destroying communications infrastructure amidst the international outcry over reports of civilian attacks.

"It doesn't make sense for Russian hackers to attack digital infrastructure if they can drop a bomb on it," said Yegor Aushev, CEO at the Kyiv-based cybersecurity firm Cyber Unit Technologies.

Tit for tat?

In the cyberwar with Russia, Ukraine has historically been a victim.

In 2015 its power grid was [attacked](#) by the Russian hacker group Sandworm. In 2017, over 12,500 computers used by Ukrainian telecom companies, banks, postal services, and government bodies [were affected](#) by a wiper tool NotPetya.

It's also being slammed with similar DDoS attacks and even more destructive digital assaults now, according to Ukrainian officials.

From Feb. 15 to March 10, Ukraine [recorded](#) over 3,000 DDoS attacks on its websites, according to Ukraine's state service responsible for information infrastructure protection.

Researchers from Slovakia-based cybersecurity firm ESET also [reported](#) a new type of destructive wiper malware—CaddyWiper— affecting computers in Ukraine.

It erases user data, corrupts files on the computer by overwriting them with null byte characters, and makes them unrecoverable.

CaddyWiper is at least the third strain of wipers, which also include HermeticWiper and IsaacWiper, to have hit Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion, according to ESET.

The number of cyberattacks on Ukrainian computer systems started to rise before the invasion, according to data shared with The Record by Ukraine's information security service.

Since then, local cybersecurity experts and state officials have been preparing for larger-scale attacks.

"In the worst-case scenario, Russia would deploy destructive attacks on energy, financial and transport infrastructure," Demediuk told Forbes Ukraine. "People are dependent on these industries, so attacks on them provoke a lot of panic."

But there was no single big cyberattack on Ukraine early in the invasion.

In fact, "Russian hackers are not as active now as expected," Ukrainian top security official Yuriy Shchyhol told The Record.

“Probably, they focus all their attention on the protection of their own information resources,” Shchyhol said.

But there have been [multiple physical attacks](#) on communications infrastructure in Ukraine as the latest assault continues, [killing](#) 902 and wounding 1,459 civilians as of March 19, according to the [United Nations](#).

Cyberwarriors who hack back

The horror of the assault is fueling a “hack back” mentality among Ukraine’s leadership — reflecting a [long-running global policy debate](#) over when offensive cyber actions are appropriate.

“The thing is that we were under attack, for all these years, online. And we never fought back—we just defended ourselves,” [said](#) Alex Bornyakov, the country’s deputy minister for Digital Transformation in an interview with TechCrunch.

“This is, for the first time, us trying to show them how we feel when infrastructure is being attacked when you can’t just use your cards or government services and everything,” he added.

That mentality is also playing out in how Ukraine’s IT Army and other groups are responding around the world.

In the early days of the war, the main task of Ukrainian cyber volunteers was to paralyze the work of websites of Russian government agencies and large corporations, according to Banik.

On February 27, the Ukrainian IT Army [hacked](#) the website of the President of Russia, Russia’s largest bank Sberbank, the Russian Ministry of Defense, and state-owned media websites.

But over time, volunteers changed their tactics and began to attack all sites that provide services to Russians—streaming services, marketplaces, Internet banking.

“This is the only way to make Russians wonder if their country’s leadership is doing the right thing,” Banik told The Record.

As of March 8, the Ukrainian IT Army targeted at least 237 Russian websites, according to security professional [Chris Partridge](#), who has been tracking their activity in his spare time.

“Most of the sites I’m tracking have been at least temporarily disrupted, imposing a cost on the site operator,” he [told](#) Forbes. “However, there are places where Ukraine seemingly can’t hit hard enough to shake a site . . . cryptocurrency sites using Cloudflare are almost totally up.”

Ukrainian volunteer hackers use various tools to knock Russian websites offline.

One of them is the app called disBalancer developed by Ukrainian startup Hacken that uses a cryptocurrency-based system to reward people for stress testing networks during normal times, but released a DDoS tool called “Liberator” geared towards this market. To use the program, the hackers have to mask their location using a VPN (a virtual private network) because the Russians block Ukrainian IP addresses.

It is impossible to see the app’s core code because the company [doesn’t use](#) open-source DDoS methods.

“Our solution was initially designed for b2b needs, but when Russia invaded Ukraine, the team managed to use it to fight in a cyberwar,” the developers wrote in its Medium blog. “It is quite dangerous to spread it on open access.”

As of March 20, over 13,000 joined disBalancer’s English [Telegram channel](#) and nearly 6,000 joined [the Ukrainian one](#).

Foreign users who spoke to The Record on condition of anonymity said that using disBalancer has become their morning routine.

“It is easy, but helps fight Russian propaganda,” one of them said.

Another tool is an online game called [Play for Ukraine](#), in which users need to move the tiles to reach the number 2048.

According to the game’s developers, each user move creates a load on the Russian network and helps to shut down websites.

The game is available for everyone but mostly targets teenagers and children. “We know that young people try to help Ukraine win, but they often don’t know what to do,” the game’s developers wrote on their website.

Developers do not reveal which Russian websites they attack but said that most of them are from the list assigned to the Ukrainian IT army.

It’s also unclear at times who is behind many tools gaining popularity.

The main problem with these initiatives is the lack of coordination, cyber volunteers told the Record.

“New channels are constantly appearing on the Telegram and you don’t know which one to trust,” said Dmytro, the former student in Kyiv.

Meanwhile, cybersecurity experts have warned about cyberattackers leveraging the interest in the digital fight against Russia. For example, cybersecurity firm Cisco Talos [reported](#) on March 10 that a fake version of disBalancer’s Liberator tool was spreading on Telegram that could spy on those who installed it.

This is concerning because volunteers often take their digital “marching orders” on Telegram or other public channels.

Professional cybersecurity experts, in turn, receive tasks from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, National Security and Defense Council, Ministry of Digital Transformation and Security Service, Aushev said.

According to him, trained hackers work with the IT Army so as not to interfere with each other’s attacks.

Of all the cyberattacks carried out since the start of the invasion, the activity of the Anonymous hacking group stands out.

Anonymous members use Twitter to warn about the upcoming and successful attacks and talk via video messages, distorting their voices.

The group claimed to be responsible for the hack of Russian state TV channels, posting pro-Ukraine content including patriotic songs and images from the invasion.

Since declaring the “cyberwar” on Russia, Anonymous [said](#) that it has hacked over 2,500 websites of Russian and Belarusian governments, state media outlets, banks, hospitals, airports and businesses.

Ukrainian government officials told The Record that they praise Anonymous’ efforts to support Ukraine, but have no links to this group.

Apart from Anonymous, at least 50 hacking groups, including Belarusian Cyber-Partisans and ContiLeaks supported Ukraine, according to a hacktivist with the user name [Cyberknow](#).

At least 25 hacking groups, including SandWorm, Ghostwriter, and FancyBear, stand with Russia, according to [Cyberknow](#).

Discomfort with chaos

While many countries condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not all of them support mass attacks on Russian sites.

"Not only might it be illegal but it runs the risk of playing into Putin's hands by enabling him to talk about 'attacks from the west'," Alan Woodward, a professor of cybersecurity at Surrey University, [told](#) the Guardian.

The U.S. government [also warned](#) that it was "prepared to respond" to digital counter attacks from Russia if the conflict expanded during the first few days of the war.

But compared to then the number of attacks and the list of targets for DDoS attacks has also decreased significantly, as Russian sites have introduced additional protection, [according to](#) the IT army.

"Such protection is difficult to overcome and it significantly reduces the list of our goals," IT Army wrote on Telegram.

The U.S. tech company Cloudflare, which protects websites from DDoS attacks and helps them run faster, also decided to continue providing services to Russia.

According to the company's CEO Matthew Prince, limiting access to information outside the country will make more vulnerable those who have used Cloudflare "to shield themselves as they have criticized the government."

"Russia needs more internet access, not less," he said in [the official statement](#).

Global internet access is also enabling Ukraine's IT Army to swell its ranks.

According to Aushev, nearly 40% of cyber-volunteers in his "legion" are foreigners.

However, joining the Ukrainian cyber army from the U.S. or the UK, for example, could break the law in those countries, experts [warn](#).

According to Chris Grove, cybersecurity strategist at Nozomi Networks, hacking wars can have unintended consequences.

"Cyber weaponry can go off-target, for instance, and end up hitting services that normal citizens depend on," he [told](#) VentureBeat.

Such incidents have occurred before, such as the [apparent use of U.S. developed offensive cyber technologies](#) in ransomware attacks as the technology trickled down the cybercrime economy.

But for Ukrainians, the ethics of the situation right now is clear.

"When you see bombs flying and children crying, you don't think about ethics," Aushev said.

Anonymous and other hacktivist groups also typically admit that what they're doing is illegal and say that if someone catches them, they will be imprisoned.

"That's why we're anonymous—we don't want to be imprisoned for telling the truth," they wrote on Twitter.

HEADLINE	03/21 Official: US probes hack on Viasat
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/u-s-intelligence-agencies-continue-to-investigate-viasat-cyberattack-neuberger-says/
GIST	<p>A top cybersecurity official in the Biden administration said Monday that the U.S. is “carefully looking” into who is behind the hack last month that targeted satellite communications company Viasat and disrupted thousands of organizations in Europe.</p> <p>Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger stopped short of attributing the attack to Russia-linked actors, following questions about the incident at a White House briefing. “There certainly are factors that we’re looking at carefully as we look at who is responsible,” she said.</p> <p>Neuberger’s comments followed a statement made by President Biden warning the private sector of possible Russian cyberattacks that could target U.S. critical infrastructure.</p> <p>Last week, the FBI and CISA issued an advisory in response to the Viasat disruption, alerting companies to take proper steps to prepare for similar incidents. The attack blocked internet access for Ukrainian officials on the day of the Russian invasion. Viasat Chairman Mark Dankberg, in an interview with CNBC today, said he couldn’t confirm Russia’s involvement in the attack, and said the information would have to come from government officials.</p> <p>“We have not yet attributed that attack, but we’re carefully looking at it because... of the impact not only in Ukraine, but also in satellite communication systems in Europe as well,” Neuberger said during the press briefing.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Bridgestone hit, attack torches Toyota
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/bridgestone-hit-as-ransomware-torches-toyota-supply-chain/178998/
GIST	<p>On Friday, Bridgestone Corp. admitted that a subsidiary experienced a ransomware attack in February, prompting it to shut down the computer network and production at its factories in North and Middle America for about a week, said Reuters.</p> <p>Among other things, Bridgestone is a major supplier of tires for Toyota vehicles. This is notable because, only 11 days after Bridgestone’s attack, another Toyota supplier – Denso Corp. – fell victim to its own ransomware attack.</p> <p>Manufacturers like Toyota, already hampered by supply chain shortages, are proving to be particularly attractive targets for ransomware groups.</p> <p>Late last month, within hours of Japan having joined Western allies in blocking some Russian banks from accessing the SWIFT international payment system and committing to giving Ukraine \$100 million in emergency aid, a spokesperson at Toyota supplier Kojima Industries Corp. said that it had apparently been hit by “some kind of cyber attack,” causing Toyota to shut down about a third of the company’s global production.</p> <p>Three Suppliers Pegged Bridgestone was apparently cyberattacked at or around the same time.</p> <p>The company told Threatpost that Bridgestone Americas detected “a serious IT security incident” on Feb. 27. “Since then, we have proactively notified federal law enforcement and are staying in communication with them,” according to its statement.</p> <p>The company said that it’s also “working around the clock” with external security advisors to determine the scope and nature of the incident, which its investigation determined was a ransomware attack, albeit not a targeted one.</p>

“Unfortunately, ransomware attacks similar to this one are increasing in sophistication and affecting thousands of organizations of all sizes,” Bridgestone said.

Shortly after midnight on Feb. 28, a workers’ union at a Bridgestone plant in Warren County, Tennessee [posted](#) on Facebook about “a potential information security incident,” discovered “in the early morning hours” the day prior.

“Out of an abundance of caution, we disconnected many of our manufacturing and retreading facilities in Latin America and North America from our network to contain and prevent any potential impact,” the post continued. “First shift operations were shut down, so those employees were sent home.”

The impact was felt in cities [far](#) and [wide](#). Even days after the fact, plants stayed down and workers stayed home. Bridgestone America only resumed normal operations “about a week” in, according to Reuters.

Bridgestone said that the threat actor followed “a pattern of behavior common to attacks of this type by removing information from a limited number of Bridgestone systems and threatening to make this information public.”

LockBit Claimed Attack

Indeed, the Lockbit ransomware group claimed the attack for themselves.

According to [multiple sources](#), the group gave the company a window to pay up before they’d release the data and added a countdown timer for dramatic effect.

Toyota’s next supply chain attack was less dramatic, relatively speaking. On March 10, Denso – formerly of Toyota, now a breakaway supplier of technology and parts – [discovered](#) that “its group company in Germany network was illegally accessed by a third party,” according to a company [statement](#). “DENSO promptly cut off the network connection of devices that received unauthorized access and confirmed that there is no impact on other DENSO facilities. Details are under investigation, there is no interruption to production activities.”

Dark Web intelligence group DarkTracer [tweeted](#) that a different group – Pandora – was responsible in this case.

Manufacturers Are Easy Marks

The global supply chain has enabled manufacturers to be incredibly efficient in their day-to-day operations. When supplies roll in on a consistent and reliable schedule, plants can perform “[just-in-time](#)” production, minimizing inventory costs and time wasted. (Toyota is actually credited with inventing this operating philosophy.)

However, COVID-19 demonstrated the risks in just-in-time production, and ransomware is proving it again. When a perfectly choreographed dance of suppliers, workers, schedules and processes is interrupted by an IT shutdown – and there’s not much inventory to fall back on, on top of that – the consequences are felt more quickly and more severely than they otherwise would be.

“With ransomware attacks hitting major suppliers and companies like Bridgestone and Toyota, now is the time for enterprises to prioritize their cyber asset management strategy,” Keith Neilson of CloudSphere told Threatpost via email. “Organizations need to have a clear understanding of their entire cyber asset inventory and security coverage gaps for existing security controls to work.

“Organizations should start by discovering all cyber assets in their IT environment,” he continued, “understanding connections between business services, and enforcing strict security guardrails.” With a full picture of IT infrastructure and security controls, plant managers can design failsafes for when the worst-case scenario occurs.

	Perhaps, in the future, manufacturers will be as efficient in their ransomware responses as they are in their day-to-day operations.
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HEADLINE	03/22 Dell BIOS bugs affect millions of systems
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/03/new-dell-bios-bugs-affect-millions-of.html
GIST	<p>Five new security weaknesses have been disclosed in Dell BIOS that, if successfully exploited, could lead to code execution on vulnerable systems, joining the likes of firmware vulnerabilities recently uncovered in Insyde Software's InsydeH2O and HP Unified Extensible Firmware Interface (UEFI).</p> <p>Tracked as CVE-2022-24415, CVE-2022-24416, CVE-2022-24419, CVE-2022-24420, and CVE-2022-24421, the high-severity vulnerabilities are rated 8.2 out of 10 on the CVSS scoring system.</p> <p>"The active exploitation of all the discovered vulnerabilities can't be detected by firmware integrity monitoring systems due to limitations of the Trusted Platform Module (TPM) measurement," firmware security company Binarly, which discovered the latter three flaws, said in a write-up.</p> <p>"The remote device health attestation solutions will not detect the affected systems due to the design limitations in visibility of the firmware runtime."</p> <p>All the flaws relate to improper input validation vulnerabilities affecting the System Management Mode (SMM) of the firmware, effectively allowing a local authenticated attacker to leverage the system management interrupt (SMI) to achieve arbitrary code execution.</p> <p>System Management Mode refers to a special-purpose CPU mode in x86 microcontrollers that's designed for handling system-wide functions like power management, system hardware control, thermal monitoring, and other proprietary manufacturer-developed code.</p> <p>Whenever one of these operations is requested, a non-maskable interrupt (SMI) is invoked at runtime, which executes SMM code installed by the BIOS. Given that SMM code executes at the highest privilege level and is invisible to the underlying operating system, the method makes it ripe for abuse to deploy persistent firmware implants.</p> <p>A number of Dell products, including Alienware, Inspiron, Vostro line-ups, and Edge Gateway 3000 Series, are impacted, with the Texas-headquartered PC manufacturer recommending customers to upgrade their BIOS at the "earliest opportunity."</p> <p>"The ongoing discovery of these vulnerabilities demonstrate what we describe as 'repeatable failures' around the lack of input sanitation or, in general, insecure coding practices," Binarly researchers said.</p> <p>"These failures are a direct consequence of the complexity of the codebase or support for legacy components that get less security attention, but are still widely deployed in the field. In many cases, the same vulnerability can be fixed over multiple iterations, and still, the complexity of the attack surface leaves open gaps for malicious exploitation."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 HHS: hospitals business continuity plan
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/critical-infrastructure/hhs-amid-russian-threat-hospitals-need-4-6-week-business-continuity-plan
GIST	<p>Echoing recent healthcare industry stakeholder groups, the Department of Health and Human Services is urging provider organizations to review and bolster defenses to guard against possible fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a general rule, business continuity plans should cover between four to six weeks of continuity in the wake of an attack.</p>

HHS is concerned that U.S. hospitals and health systems may be directly targeted by Russian-sponsored cyber actors, or become incidental victims of Russian-deployed malware or ransomware. The overt concern is that a cyberattack could disrupt hospital services.

As [previously reported](#), the American Hospital Association and HHS Cybersecurity Coordination Center, as well as healthcare entities, have seen an increase in nefarious cyber activity like phishing attacks in the wake of the invasion.

In particular, [AHA National Advisor](#) for Cybersecurity John Riggi is concerned with the ongoing use of "vulnerability chaining" from Russian-state hackers. These attacks link multiple vulnerabilities together into a single attack to exploit networks and data, highlighting the need to use properly configured multi-factor authentication to detect and block unknown devices.

Healthcare entities should also prioritize vulnerability patching to prevent unauthorized remote access and coded execution. Riggi added that "reports of the Russian military deploying destructive malware in Ukraine continue to add urgency to acting on all alerts related to cyber threats posed by the Russian government."

Noting the complicated root cause of the Ukrainian conflict, HHS dives deeper into Russian-based threats and potential attack methods that providers should review to bolster monitoring, reviewing, and defense mechanisms.

In particular, the Conti group has expressly stated its support of the Russian attacks, especially organizations where IT outages could impact lives. The healthcare sector has been a prime target of the ransomware actors for the last two years, as such, HHS warned covered entities should review indicators of compromise.

The alert also contains attack details for NotPetya, Ryuk, and FIN12, both of which have highly targeted U.S. hospitals and healthcare entities using ransomware. Ryuk has exploited more than 235 hospitals and inpatient facilities since 2018.

One out of five FIN12 victims are in the healthcare sector, HHS explained. The group was behind multiple, major attacks on the U.S. healthcare system, "focused purely on ransomware, moving faster than its peers and hitting big targets and high-revenue victims."

The HHS threat analysis also includes threat tactics and indicators of compromise for the more recent wiper variants spotted in the wild being used by Russian-based hacking groups.

Covered entities are being urged to ensure they're prepared for a potential fallout, by reviewing reporting processes and minimizing personnel gaps in IT and OT security and practicing incident response, resilience, and business continuity plans to ensure care operations can continue in the event of an attack even if systems are disrupted or forced offline.

HHS also recommended geo-fencing for all inbound and outbound traffic related to Ukraine and surrounding regions. The insights include a host of free resources, including those outlining the threat of Russian-based cyberattacks.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Android app password stealing malware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/android-password-stealing-malware-infects-100-000-google-play-users/
GIST	A malicious Android app that steals Facebook credentials has been installed over 100,000 times via the Google Play Store, with the app still available to download.

The Android malware is disguised as a cartoonifier app called 'Craftsart Cartoon Photo Tools,' allowing users to upload an image and convert it into a cartoon rendering.

Over the past week, security researchers and mobile security firm Pradeo discovered that the Android app includes a trojan called '[FaceStealer](#),' which displays a Facebook login screen that requires users to log in before using the app.

According to Jamf security researcher [Michal Rajčan](#), when users enter their credentials, the app will send them to a command and control server at [zutuu\[.\]info](#) [[VirusTotal](#)], which the attackers can then collect.

In addition to the C2 server, the malicious Android app will connect to [www.dozenorms\[.\]club](#) URL [[VirusTotal](#)] where further data is sent, and which has been used in the past to promote other malicious FaceStealer Android apps.

As [Pradeo explains in its report](#), the author and distributor of these apps appear to have automated the repackaging process and inject a small piece of malicious code into an otherwise legitimate app.

This helps the apps get through the Play Store vetting procedure without raising any red flags. As soon as the user opens it, they are not given any actual functionality unless they log in to their Facebook account.

However, once they log in, the app will provide limited functionality by uploading a specified image to the online editor, [http://color.photofuneditor.com/](#), which will apply a graphics filter to the picture.

This new image will then be displayed in the app, where it can be downloaded by the user or sent to friends.

As many apps unnecessarily require users to log in to a server, in many cases Facebook, users have become numb to these login prompts and more commonly input their credentials without suspicion.

Signs of trouble

As popular and fun as these cartoonifier apps may be, people should be extra cautious when installing software that requires them to input sensitive information such as biometric data (images of their faces).

These apps perform the image alterations and apply filters on a remote server, not locally on the device, so your data is uploaded to a remote location and is at risk of being kept indefinitely, shared with others, resold, etc.

Since the particular app is still on the Play Store, one may automatically assume that the Android app is trustworthy. But unfortunately, malicious Android apps sometimes sneak into Google Play Store and remain until they are detected from bad reviews or discovered by security companies.

However, it is possible to spot scammy and malicious apps in many cases by looking at their reviews on Google Play.

....the user reviews for 'Craftsart Cartoon Photo Tools' are overwhelmingly negative, totaling a score of only 1.7 stars out of a possible five. Furthermore, many of these reviews warn that the app has limited functionality and requires you to sign in to Facebook first.

Secondly, the developer's name is 'Google Commerce Ltd', which indicates it is developed by Google. Also, the listed contact details include a random person's Gmail email address, which is a big red flag.

We have visited the developer's page, hosted on Blogspot, to read the project's privacy policy, and we found a different email address there, so there's even a mismatch.

Finally, we tried sending an email to the author for a comment on the allegations made by Pradeo, but one of the addresses doesn't even exist.

	This may seem like excessive scrutiny for each app you install on your smartphone, but it should be the standard checking procedure for inherently risky apps.
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HEADLINE	03/21 BitRAT malware distribution underway
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/bitrat-malware-now-spreading-as-a-windows-10-license-activator/
GIST	<p>A new BitRAT malware distribution campaign is underway, exploiting users looking to activate pirated Windows OS versions for free using unofficial Microsoft license activators.</p> <p>BitRAT is a powerful remote access trojan sold on cybercrime forums and dark web markets for as low as \$20 (lifetime access) to any cybercriminal who wants it.</p> <p>As such, each buyer follows their own approach to malware distribution, ranging from phishing, watering holes, or trojanized software.</p> <p>Targeting pirates with malware</p> <p>In a new BitRAT malware distribution campaign discovered by researchers at AhnLab, threat actors are distributing the malware as a Windows 10 Pro license activator on webhards.</p> <p>Webhards are online storage services popular in South Korea that have a steady influx of visitors from direct download links posted on social media platforms or Discord. Due to their wide use in the region, threat actors are now more commonly using webhards to distribute malware.</p> <p>The actor behind the new BitRAT campaign appears to be Korean based on some of the Korean characters in the code snippets and the manner of its distribution.</p> <p>To properly use Windows 10, you need to purchase and activate a license with Microsoft. While there are ways to get Windows 10 for free, you still need a valid Windows 7 license to get the free upgrade.</p> <p>Those who do not want to deal with licensing issues or do not have a license to upgrade commonly turn to pirating Windows 10 and using unofficial activators, many of which contain malware.</p> <p>In this campaign, the malicious file promoted as a Windows 10 activator is named 'W10DigitalActivation.exe' and features a simple GUI with a button to "Activate Windows 10."</p> <p>However, instead of activating the Windows license on the host system, the "activator" will download malware from a hardcoded command and control server operated by the threat actors.</p> <p>The fetched payload is BitRAT, installed in %TEMP% as 'Software_Reporter_Tool.exe' and added to the Startup folder. The downloader also adds exclusions for Windows Defender to ensure that BitRAT won't encounter detection issues.</p> <p>Once the malware installation process is completed, the downloader deletes itself from the system leaving behind only BitRAT.</p> <p>A versatile RAT</p> <p>BitRAT is promoted as a powerful, inexpensive, and versatile malware that can snatch a wide range of valuable information from the host, perform DDoS attacks, UAC bypass, etc.</p> <p>BitRAT supports generic keylogging, clipboard monitoring, webcam access, audio recording, credential theft from web browsers, and XMRig coin mining functionality.</p>

	<p>Additionally, it offers remote control for Windows systems, hidden virtual network computing (hVNC), and reverse proxy through SOCKS4 and SOCKS5 (UDP). On that front, ASEC's analysts have found strong code similarities with TinyNuke, and its derivative, AveMaria (Warzone).</p> <p>The hidden desktop feature on these RATs is so valuable that some hacking groups, like the Kimsuky, incorporated them in their arsenal just to use the hVNC tool.</p> <p>Risk of piracy Even if the legal and ethical aspects are ignored, using pirated software is always a security gamble.</p> <p>The more tools are used to activate illegally obtained copies of software or crack their intellectual property protection systems, the greater the chances of ending up with a nasty malware infection.</p> <p>Those who can't afford to purchase a Windows license should look at alternative options instead, such as accepting the limitations of the free version, monitoring for special offers from trustworthy platforms, or using Linux.</p> <p>Ultimately, users should not trust license activators and any unsigned executable authored and released by unknown vendors to run on your system.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Okta investigates claims of data breach
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/okta-investigating-claims-of-customer-data-breach-from-lapsus-group/
GIST	<p>Okta, a leading provider of authentication services and Identity and access management (IAM) solutions says it is investigating claims of data breach.</p> <p>On Tuesday, data extortion group Lapsus\$ posted screenshots in their Telegram channel of what it alleges to be Okta's customer data.</p> <p>As publicly-traded company worth over \$6 billion, Okta employees over 5,000 people across the world and provides software services to major organizations including Siemens, ITV, Pret a Manger, Starling Bank, among others.</p> <p>Lapsus\$ claims to have Okta customer data Data extortion group Lapsus\$ claims to have acquired "superuser/admin" access to Okta.com and that it accessed Okta's customer data, as seen by BleepingComputer:</p> <p>"Okta is aware of the reports and is currently investigating," an Okta spokesperson told BleepingComputer.</p> <p>"We will provide updates as more information becomes available."</p> <p>Screenshots shared by Lapsus\$, as seen by BleepingComputer, show the system date set to January 21st, 2022, indicating the hack may have occurred months ago.</p> <p>Okta co-founder and CEO Todd McKinnon has now confirmed this: "We believe the screenshots shared online are connected to this January event," says McKinnon.</p> <p>"Based on our investigation to date, there is no evidence of ongoing malicious activity beyond the activity detected in January."</p> <p>The development follows Lapsus\$' this week's claim that it breached Microsoft's internal Azure DevOps server.</p>

	<p>On Monday, Lapsus\$ leaked what it claims to be 37 GB of stolen source code for Bing, Cortana, and other Microsoft projects, and Microsoft confirmed it was investigating.</p> <p>Additionally, the group claimed today that they have breached LG Electronics (LGE) for the "second time" in a year, although BleepingComputer has not confirmed this claim...</p> <p>Lapsus\$ has previously leaked gigabytes of proprietary data purportedly stolen from leading companies such as Samsung, NVIDIA, and Mercado Libre who confirmed this month it had suffered a breach.</p> <p>Data extortion groups like Lapsus\$ breach victims, but as opposed to encrypting confidential files like a ransomware operator would, these actors steal and hold on to victims' proprietary data, and publish it should their extortion demands not be met.</p> <p>If Lapsus\$'s claims of breaching Okta's systems turn out to be accurate, it remains yet to be found out how many of Okta's customers were impacted and to what extent.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 'Unique attack chain' in phishing campaign
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/threat-actor-using-unique-attack-chain-to-drop-backdoor-in-new-phishing-campaign
GIST	<p>An unknown and likely advanced threat actor is using a novel combination of open source tools, steganography, and a detection bypass technique to attack government agencies, real estate companies, and construction firms in France.</p> <p>Researchers from Proofpoint tracking the phishing campaign have so far not been able to identify either a motive for it or the threat actor behind the attacks. But in a blog Monday, the email security vendor described the combination of tactics and techniques in the campaign as adding up to a "unique attack chain."</p> <p>Successful compromise would allow the threat actor to take a variety of actions including stealing data, installing additional malware, or taking complete control of infected systems, Proofpoint warned.</p> <p>The phishing lure in the campaign is a macro-enabled Word document purporting to contain messaging related to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). When the macro is executed, it reaches out to an image URL and downloads a PowerShell script that is hidden using steganography in the image of Swiper, a character in a children's cartoon show. The PowerShell script in turn downloads and installs Chocolatey, a software installer for Windows environments that is available both as a free open source tool and as a paid, multifunctional product.</p> <p>The PowerShell script uses Chocolatey to install Python and a Python package installer. That installer in turn is used to download various other components, including a Python-based reverse proxy client called PySocks for sending traffic through HTTP and SOCKS proxy servers. In the next step, the PowerShell script downloads a backdoor — which Proofpoint has dubbed "Serpent" — on the compromised system.</p> <p>The backdoor then periodically pings a remote Tor proxy server (onion.pet) waiting for specific commands and sends the output from any command to a second attacker-monitored Tor proxy server. The attack chain ends with a command that redirects the email recipient to a Microsoft Office help website.</p> <p>Proofpoint said this is the first time it had observed a threat actor using Chocolatey in a phishing campaign. Similarly, the use of Python is also unique and not something that Proofpoint has typically observed among malware authors, the security vendor said.</p> <p>Background Activity</p> <p>All the malicious activity takes places in the background. The only thing the user sees in the end is a Microsoft pop-up that redirects them to a Microsoft help webpage, says Sherrod DeGrippo, vice president,</p>

threat research and detection at Proofpoint. "When macros are enabled, the malicious content is automatically loaded in the background so a recipient wouldn't see the activity on their screen," DeGrippo says. "For example, with the Swiper image, PowerShell calls out to the jpg to get the obfuscated data and runs follow-on commands without alerting a user the activity is occurring, or showing the victim the jpg itself," she says.

Notable in this attack chain is that a lot of the tools used, such as Powershell, Chocolatey, and PySocks, are legitimate tools that could be found legitimately on a host, DeGrippo says.

One particularly significant aspect of the attack chain is how it uses the schtasks.exe job scheduler to try to bypass malware detection mechanisms. "The technique is novel in its application of schtask.exe," DeGrippo notes. "Historically schtask has been leveraged as a persistence mechanism — by means of adding a task — to ensure memory loaded payloads persist after a reboot."

Malware authors have also used it as a means of initial execution for a secondary payload or dropper, she says.

What is unique in this instance is schtask is not used for repeating a task. Rather, it is used to create a one-time task that essentially results in an executable file being executed as a Microsoft signed binary — or in a manner that heuristics-based endpoint detection and AV tools would likely trust, DeGrippo says. While many components of the attack path are unique, such as the use of encoded images, using two onion.pet servers, and the use of schtasks.exe to create a one-time task, the attack chain is not necessarily sophisticated, she adds.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Crowdsourced efforts in Ukraine war
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/crowdsourced-efforts-get-leveraged-in-ukraine-conflict
GIST	<p>The Russian invasion of the Ukraine was bound to take place in part in cyberspace. While the use of Russian offensive security operations against the West has long been alleged, the rise of crowdsourced security efforts in the current war has taken an interesting turn.</p> <p>First, there were the accusations of Russia utilizing the Premise microtask platform to identify everything from bomb craters to targets of opportunity. This was backed up by Ukrainian military forces in a Facebook post, which eventually led to a curt rebuttal from the CEO of Premise, who denied the claims. Subsequently, the company turned off Premise in Ukraine.</p> <p>On the Ukrainian side of the conflict, Anonymous launched #OperationRussia to target government assets owned and operated by the Russian government, Chechnya, and Belarus. While Anonymous is a wild card when it comes to political causes, its Twitter feed was ripe with targets, and a string of successes has emerged since the group launched the operation in late February. Many dozens of .ru websites, Kremlin websites, and government-backed companies were all fair game. Even the Russian stock exchange was out of action, serving a "I'm a teapot" HTTP 418 error for the first few weeks of the conflict before being sinkholed completely.</p> <p>Creation of a "Cyber Army"</p> <p>Then there are official bug bounty platforms. Hacken.io was launched in 2017 and is based in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital. It specializes in bug bounties and vulnerability disclosure programs around blockchain products. While I don't think much of cryptocurrencies, I did have a go at some of its bug bounties back in the day, and it resembles any other bug bounty platform used by common crowdsourced security platforms (think Bugcrowd, HackerOne, etc.).</p> <p>At the outset of the conflict, Hacken launched "Cyber Army" via email sent to all security researchers currently signed up to its platform, asking them to get involved directly in the conflict by discovering vulnerabilities in Russian websites to be leveraged by Ukrainian military assets.</p>

The email states:

"Now it's high time for you to use your technical skills and knowledge for global peace and security. We've created Cyber Army to stop Russian propaganda machines and contribute to disseminating real information about the Russian invasion of Ukraine among Russian citizens. Everyone can join us to help Ukraine win the cyberwar against Russia."

The company's Telegram account now has over 1,000 users and is climbing every day. Hacken elaborates further on this bug bounty program on its website, which states:

- "Select a russian [sic] propaganda or infrastructure website
- "Find critical vulnerabilities
- "Submit a report
- "That's it! We'll put it in the good hands of Ukrainian cyber forces"

The site explains how the organization is mainly looking for serious stuff, such as RCE, SQLi, and RFI/LFI and will ignore low/medium vulnerabilities. So, this is not the time to pester the site with that cross-site scripting vulnerability you found.

Then a suggested target list is provided, which includes the targets you would expect in this kind of scenario, such as hosting providers, aerospace, energy, and pretty much any infrastructure that would disrupt the Russian war machine.

Since the initial publication, Hacken has scaled back the message on its site to "defending Ukrainian assets" by finding vulnerabilities in them, rather than attempting to find exploits in Russian infrastructure. And it's been a successful program — the page tracking the discovered vulnerabilities now lists hundreds of exploitable vulnerabilities, with a single researcher responsible for 325.

Hacken now works in conjunction with the IT army of Ukraine and messages outlining their successes are regularly broadcast across both of their Telegram channels. These range from the number of Russian websites taken down in DDoS attacks to meme-like successes, including a cash register printing out expletives about Putin or a gas station pump deep in Russia displaying "Glory to the Ukraine."

All in the Game

Last week, the game site playforukraine.life was released. While on the surface, users are playing a game, in the background players are sending requests to a rotating list of Russian websites, which will eventually cause DDoS incidents when enough people are playing.

Danger for Organizations

So, what's the danger here? Because of the scope creep of the attacks, it's important to dissociate from or review your associations with anything that is based in Russia or has any connection to Russia. While the initial attacks clearly focused on the Russian government, and then spread to Russian-backed companies, this has quickly ballooned to "anything Russian or connected to Russia," which includes Western companies that haven't yet exited the Russian market. They could be potential targets by seeming to support the invasion.

Just a single tweet could define a company as in league with Russia and it would feel the wrath of the masses online, without any gatekeeper there to validate the intelligence in the first place.

While companies around the world are evaluating their exposure to this conflict and try to shore up their defenses against Russian retaliation because of sanctions, I find it increasingly likely that we will see companies caught up in the tidal wave of outrage and become victims to online masses when they are named and shamed and their online assets attacked because of a vague association with one side or the other.

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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/21/apple-down-latest-icloud-music-tv-store-servers-outages-offline-error
GIST	<p>Apple has said all its services, including the App Store, Apple TV and Apple Music, have resumed following an outage that started late afternoon on Monday.</p> <p>Nearly a dozen Apple services were down for thousands of users.</p> <p>The company's system status page had showed 11 outages including podcasts, music and arcade. It said Apple was investigating the issue and services may be slow or unavailable.</p> <p>According to outage tracking website DOWNDetector.com, more than 4,000 users reported problems accessing Apple Music, while nearly 4,000 reported problems with iCloud.</p> <p>Users also flagged difficulties with "find my iPhone", Apple store, maps and support.</p> <p>DOWNDetector tracks outages by collating status reports from several sources including user-submitted errors on its platform. The outage may be affecting a larger number of users.</p> <p>Apple did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The company was responding to affected users on Twitter but it was unclear what caused the outages.</p> <p>Bloomberg News reported that Apple's corporate staff working from home and retail workers were also facing problems. The outage delayed product repairs, pickups and limited workers' access to internal websites, the report said.</p> <p>According to the report, Apple told staff that the outage stemmed from domain name system, or DNS – an address book of the internet which enables computers to match website addresses with the correct server.</p> <p>In a number of incidents last year, DNS issues caused widespread outages on social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram, and brought down websites of airlines and banks for several hours.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia court bans Facebook, Instagram
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/21/russia-court-bans-facebook-instagram-on-extremism-/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — A Moscow court banned Facebook and Instagram on Monday for what it deemed extremist activity in a case against their parent company, Meta.</p> <p>The Tverskoy District Court fulfilled a request from prosecutors to outlaw Meta Platforms Inc. and banned Facebook and Instagram for what they called "extremist activities." Prosecutors have accused the social media platforms of ignoring government requests to remove what they described as fake news about the Russian military action in Ukraine and calls for protests in Russia.</p> <p>The court's ruling bans Meta from opening offices and doing business in Russia. Meta declined to comment when contacted by The Associated Press.</p> <p>Prosecutors haven't requested to ban the Meta-owned messaging service WhatsApp, which is widely popular in Russia. The authorities also emphasized that they do not intend to punish individual Russians who use Facebook or Instagram.</p> <p>Instagram and Facebook were already blocked in Russia after the communications and media regulator Roskomnadzor said they were being used to call for violence against Russian soldiers. In addition to blocking Facebook and Instagram, Russian authorities also have shut access to foreign media websites.</p>

	<p>The court's verdict comes amid multipronged efforts by Russian authorities to control the message amid the military action in Ukraine, which the Kremlin describes as a "special military operation" intended to uproot alleged "neo-Nazi nationalists."</p> <p>A new law fast-tracked on March 4 by the Kremlin-controlled parliament, a week after Russia launched the attack on Ukraine, envisions prison terms of up to 15 years for posting "fake" information about the military that differs from the official narrative.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Biden: Russia exploring cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/world/europe/biden-russia-cyberattack.html
GIST	<p>President Biden warned on Monday that Russia is exploring the possibility of waging potential cyberattacks against the United States in retaliation for economic penalties imposed on Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>In a statement issued days before he is set to travel to Brussels for a NATO summit, Mr. Biden encouraged private sector companies in the United States to strengthen their cybersecurity against a potential breach by Russia.</p> <p>"It's part of Russia's playbook," Mr. Biden said in the statement. "Today, my administration is reiterating those warnings based on evolving intelligence that the Russian Government is exploring options for potential cyberattacks."</p> <p>The administration has no evidence of a specific, credible potential cyberattack against the United States, but rather "preparatory activity" targeting critical infrastructure, according to Anne Neuberger, Mr. Biden's deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technology.</p> <p>It is not the first time the United States has warned that Russia could hack U.S. companies as the war rages in Ukraine. Ms. Neuberger said Monday's warning was an attempt by the Biden administration to raise awareness of Russia's ability to conduct a digital assault against American infrastructure.</p> <p>Ms. Neuberger said the administration recently observed "preparatory activity" for potential hacking of American infrastructure, and had shared that information with companies in a classified briefing last week. Such activity can include scanning websites for vulnerabilities. Ms. Neuberger made clear there was still an active threat of Russian hacking against critical infrastructure, including oil and energy companies, and hospital systems.</p> <p>"There's so much more we need to do to have the confidence that we've locked our digital doors, particularly for the critical services Americans rely on," Ms. Neuberger said, noting that most American critical infrastructure is managed by the private sector. "Those owners and operators have the ability and responsibility to harden the systems and networks we all rely on."</p> <p>The White House last week briefed more than 100 companies in the United States on the best ways to defend against a cyberattack. The administration on Monday directed companies to "harden your cyber defenses immediately," recommending measures such as enabling multifactor authentication, ensuring offline backups of data and educating employees on hacking methods.</p> <p>"You have the power, the capacity, and the responsibility to strengthen the cybersecurity and resilience of the critical services and technologies on which Americans rely," Mr. Biden said in the statement.</p> <p>Ms. Neuberger noted that Russia is still conducting cyberactivity against Ukraine. Ukraine's minister of digital transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, said in mid-February that a cyberattack that month against the websites of Ukraine's defense ministry and army, as well as the interfaces of the country's two largest banks, "bore traces of foreign intelligence services."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Microsoft investigates claim of breach
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3vk9x/microsoft-hacked-lapsus-extortion-investigating
GIST	<p>Microsoft is investigating claims that an extortion-focused hacking group that has previously compromised massive companies such as Ubisoft and Nvidia has gained access to internal Microsoft systems, according to a statement from the company.</p> <p>The hacking group, which goes by the self-designated name LAPSUS\$, has successfully breached a wave of corporations recently. LAPSUS\$ sometimes makes unusual ransom demands of its victims, including asking Nvidia to unlock aspects of its graphics cards to make them more suitable for mining cryptocurrency. The group has so far not made any public demands against Microsoft.</p> <p>On Sunday, LAPSUS\$ posted a screenshot of what appeared to be an internal Microsoft developer account to their Telegram channel. The screenshot appeared to be from an Azure DevOps account, a product that Microsoft offers that allows developers to collaborate on projects. Specific projects shown in the screenshot include “Bing_UX,” potentially referring to the user experience of Microsoft’s Bing search engine; “Bing-Source,” indicating access to the source code of the search engine; and “Cortana,” Microsoft’s smart assistant. Other sections include “mscomdev,” “microsoft,” and “msblox,” indicating whoever took the screenshot may have access to other code repositories as well.</p> <p>Shortly after posting the screenshot, an administrator of LAPSUS\$’s Telegram channel deleted the image. “Deleted for now will repost later,” they wrote.</p> <p>On Sunday, a Microsoft spokesperson told Motherboard in an email that “We are aware of the claims and are investigating.”</p> <p>Earlier this month the group said on its Telegram channel that it was seeking employees inside companies who would be willing to work with them, including Microsoft.</p> <p>“We recruit employees/insider at the following!!!!,” the group wrote on March 10, followed by a list of sectors such as telecommunications firms, large software or gaming companies, or data hosts. In the message, the group explicitly pointed to Apple, IBM, and Microsoft as companies they would be interested in. “TO NOTE: WE ARE NOT LOOKING FOR DATA, WE ARE LOOKING FOR THE EMPLOYEE TO PROVIDE US A VPN OR CITRIX TO THE NETWORK, or some anydesk,” the message added, describing particular ways that the hackers may be able to access target companies’ networks with the rogue employee’s help.</p> <p>Since December, the group has breached the Ministry of Health of Brazil, a slew of Brazilian and Portuguese companies, and then Nvidia and Samsung in February and March respectively, according to a timeline of LAPSUS\$ attacks published by cybersecurity firm Silent Push. The group also seemingly took credit for breaching Ubisoft this month.</p> <p>During some of its attacks, the group made a demand of payment in exchange for not leaking internal data it had stolen from the victims. In the NVIDIA case, the hackers demanded that the company open source its GPU drivers and remove a limitation on its 30-series cards around mining Ethereum, The Verge reported at the time. On its Telegram group, LAPSUS\$ also claimed that NVIDIA, or someone working on its behalf, hacked back the attacks and tried to in turn encrypt the stolen material. The group ended up leaking some NVIDIA data as well as data stolen from Samsung.</p> <p>LAPSUS\$ may have also been responsible for hacking gaming giant Electronic Arts, although the hackers didn’t use the LAPSUS\$ name until after Motherboard revealed that breach last June. In a later post on an underground forum, a user wrote “the real credits are for LAPSUS\$, we will leak a lot more stuff.”</p> <p>In an email to Motherboard, Stefano De Blasi, cyber threat research analyst at cybersecurity firm Digital Shadows, pointed to two things that make LAPSUS\$ different from your common extortion gang. First, the group has never actually deployed ransomware, instead exfiltrating data and using that to blackmail the</p>

target. This allows the group to move more stealthily, De Blasi said. De Blasi also pointed to LAPSUS\$\$'s interactive presence on Telegram, and specifically that the group messages with its followers.

[Motherboard previously reported](#) that hackers were able to gain access to the contents of MSN, Hotmail, and Outlook users' email inboxes after abusing access to a customer support portal.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Hackers demand \$15M from TransUnion
SOURCE	https://www.bitdefender.com/blog/hotforsecurity/hackers-demand-15-million-ransom-from-transunion-after-cracking-password-password/
GIST	<p>International credit bureau TransUnion says that hackers managed to breach a server operated by its South African division, and gained access to the personal information of individuals.</p> <p>According to an FAQ published by TransUnion South Africa, the cybercriminals gained access to the sensitive data by using the compromised credentials of one of the company's clients.</p> <p>The firm says that the exposed data "may include personal information, such as telephone numbers, email addresses, identity numbers, physical addresses, and some credit scores."</p> <p>As a precaution, TransUnion South Africa took some of its infrastructure offline temporarily while it investigated what had gone wrong.</p> <p>A Brazilian hacking group calling itself N4aughtysecTU has claimed responsibility for the data breach, and has told the press that it stole 4TB of data, containing the records of 54 million customers.</p> <p>Embarrassingly, the hackers claim that the account they compromised to gain access to data on TransUnion's server was protected with a password of "password".</p> <p>N4aughtysecTU sent an extortion demand to TransUnion South Africa that requests R223 million (approximately US \$15 million) in cryptocurrency in exchange for not releasing the stolen data.</p> <p>The hackers have also threatened to access TransUnion's clients with financial demands.</p> <p>TransUnion South Africa says it will not pay the ransom, and that it has brought in cybersecurity experts to assist in its response to the incident.</p> <p>In addition, TransUnion has attempted to debunk N4aughtysecTU's claims that 54 million records have been exposed, claiming that those records relate to a 2017 data incident not involving TransUnion.</p> <p>What TransUnion South Africa isn't saying is just how many individuals may be affected by the breach, or how much data the hackers may have accessed, beyond their generic claim that it believes "the incident impacted an isolated server holding limited data from [its] South African business."</p> <p>For those victims who have had their data breached it is particularly galling. They may have little reason to have ever heard of TransUnion South Africa, let alone direct business with them. However, companies will have made use of TransUnion's credit-checking services to determine if consumers should be approved for a loan or allowed to open an account.</p> <p>TransUnion says it is offering individuals whose personal data may have been affected by the breach a free annual subscription to the TrueIdentity identity protection run by ... err... TransUnion.</p> <p>Yes, TransUnion had your personal data without your knowledge or permission. TransUnion suffered a data breach which resulted in that data ending up in the hands of hackers. TransUnion says you can use its products to protect yourself from identity thieves.</p>

	Surely the best protection of all would have been if they hadn't been storing people's data with inadequate security in the first place.
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	03/22 Northern Ireland terror threat level reduced
SOURCE	https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40834016.html
GIST	<p>The terrorism threat level in Northern Ireland has been lowered from severe to substantial for the first time in 12 years, Britain's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis announced.</p> <p>The decision to change the threat level is taken by MI5, independent of the British Government.</p> <p>The threat level is subject to continuous review, and judgments about the threat are based on a wide range of information.</p> <p>This is the first time that the threat level in Northern Ireland has been reduced from severe since it was first published in 2010.</p> <p>Substantial means that a terrorist attack is likely and might well occur without further warning.</p> <p>Mr Lewis said: "This is the first time the threat level in Northern Ireland has changed since 2010 and shows the significant progress that Northern Ireland has made, and continues to make, towards a more peaceful, more prosperous and safer society.</p> <p>"It is a testament to the ongoing commitment to protecting the peace process and tackling Northern Ireland-related terrorism, and the tremendous efforts of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and MI5 for their hard won gains over the past decade.</p> <p>"However, it is not a time for complacency. There is still a minority who wish to cause harm in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>"As ever, the public should remain vigilant and report any concerns they may have to the police."</p> <p>Dissident republican terrorist activity has been at a lower level in Northern Ireland in recent years and security services have secured a number of successes disrupting the activities of the terrorist organisations.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Burkina Faso: 13 soldiers killed in ambush
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/burkina-faso-soldiers-killed-in-attack-by-suspected-islamic-extremists-says-army
GIST	<p>At least 13 soldiers were killed and eight others wounded in Burkina Faso's eastern Gourma province in an ambush by suspected Islamic extremists, the army announced on Monday.</p> <p>A number of the attackers were killed in the incident, according to the army statement.</p> <p>The military has secured the area with air support, it said. The army has for several days been carrying out large-scale operations to regain control of several areas that had been held by Islamic extremists, including Pama, Madjoari and Foutouri, said the statement.</p> <p>Burkina Faso's military seized power in a coup in January, overthrowing President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré saying that he had failed to stem growing jihadi violence in the once peaceful west African nation. Kaboré has been under house arrest in the capital, Ouagadougou, since the coup.</p>

	The junta has pledged to secure Burkina Faso from growing violence linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group that has killed thousands and displaced more than 1.5 million people.
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HEADLINE	03/21 Families fleeing Taliban settle near Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/afghan-refugee-children-arriving-in-the-seattle-area-after-the-fall-of-kabul-start-school/
GIST	<p>They lined up at the doors of Southern Heights Elementary in Burien, momentarily subdued as they waited for their first glimpse of American school. Awais, 9, in a sharp black blazer and white shirt, led the way, followed by Fazilat, 10, in sparkly pumps and a bright pink headscarf, and 7-year-old Mirwais, his father's hands resting on his shoulders.</p> <p>The three Afghan siblings, among one of the largest waves of refugees to come to the U.S. in decades, had waited for this moment since flying out of Taliban-controlled Kabul in August. They spent four months on a Texas Army base and arrived in the Seattle area in December. "We're so excited you're here!" principal Andrea Smith told them, giving a tour in advance of their first day. She had them choose from an array of donated backpacks, showed them a room where they could pray and told a class of students: "I know you guys will be there to help."</p> <p>The little school, with just over 200 students, including a large number of native Spanish speakers, did not have an interpreter on hand. But a custodian who emigrated from Afghanistan in 2019 surprised them by saying hello. Speaking a mixture of Pashto and Dari, Afghanistan's primary languages, Abdul Bakhshi reassured the children's dad that they would learn English as his own kids did.</p> <p>As the siblings hit the playground, Ally Nguyen, part of a group of volunteers helping the family resettle, told the principal the children hadn't consistently attended classes in two years. Their school in Afghanistan largely shut down when COVID-19 hit.</p> <p>"We'll get them where they need to go," Smith said.</p> <p>It's a shared mission among schools seeing an influx of Afghan students — and which may soon see a whole new group of refugees arriving from the war in Ukraine. Schools are having to quickly think through what these kids need, which means understanding not only their academic background but what they've gone through to get here.</p> <p>"You have children coming with more trauma than we can ever put words on," said Emelie Coffman, manager of the children and families program for the resettlement agency World Relief Seattle.</p> <p>The Seattle area is one of the top destinations for families fleeing the Taliban after the fall of Kabul last summer, drawn by a sizable Afghan community already here. Roughly 6,000 people born in Afghanistan lived in Washington as of 2019 census data, many given special immigrant visas because of their work for the U.S. government. About 2,900 more have come since late September after a stay on American military bases, according to state Refugee Coordinator Sarah Peterson.</p> <p>Many got separated from loved ones — spouses, parents, children and siblings — in the chaotic crowds at the Kabul airport. Family members left behind are inevitably on the minds of newly enrolled Afghan students.</p> <p>They are arriving with varying levels of education. Some, especially those who lived in cities, attended school fairly regularly while others literally not at all. If their fathers worked with the U.S. military, leaving home could be dangerous.</p> <p>Local schools have welcomed these students enthusiastically. Some districts have also been hiring or expanding the work of Pashto and Dari interpreters, adding after-school and other extended-learning</p>

programs for refugees, buddying new Afghan students with ones who have lived here for a while, and training staff about the needs and experiences of these students.

“It’s been necessary for us to really mobilize,” said Peter Lamb, a coordinator of multilingual programs for the Auburn School District. While the district has had an array of refugee students come in the past, including from Somalia, Kenya, Iraq and Afghanistan, what’s different now is having many such students, more than 100, come virtually at once, noted his colleague, Maeghan Bowman.

In the Kent School District, an interpreter who has taken on a larger role has even helped Afghan families get food stamp cards, said Kinder Garcha, the district’s refugee service liaison. Some refugees have resettlement agency caseworkers and others, having opted to leave bases on their own, don’t. They may need extra help either way, the district is finding, because resettlement agencies, scaled back during the Trump years, have been overwhelmed by the mass arrival of Afghan refugees. And large numbers of refugees from the war in Ukraine haven’t even arrived yet.

For all the effort, many schools don’t have enough resources for these kids, such as interpreters and mental health support, said Coffman of World Relief. The students get English-language instruction, but generally not by someone who speaks Pashto or Dari, and they also take regular classes where they can’t understand a thing, she said. Districts that have Afghan-language interpreters tend to have just a few, working with families.

Given what these kids have been through, Coffman said the unmet need is “absolutely heartbreaking.”

In a World Relief training for teachers, she heard about a Kent middle schooler who would freak out when a fire alarm drill went off. The student would run to a younger brother and refuse to go, or let his brother go, to a field where everyone was supposed to gather.

“He got in trouble for that,” Coffman said. What school staff didn’t realize at the time was that the alarm, to a child raised amid war, signaled trouble and he had been taught not go onto fields because of land mines.

“We have an opportunity now”

A couple weeks after starting school at Carl Sandburg Elementary in Kirkland, two Afghan siblings, a 9-year-old boy and 6-year-old girl, were in some ways doing well.

“I just want to say what a sweet and observant girl [she] is and how eager she is to learn,” the girl’s teacher wrote to a volunteer who has been helping the family and acting as a liaison with the school. (The children’s mom, like many Afghan refugees, asked that she and her children not be named because of risks to family members back home.)

“I’m seeing that she is quick to pick up on what the other students are doing, especially if it’s something she can copy or imitate. Naturally, when I am giving direct instruction and the students are sitting and learning about a new concept, that is where I see [her] want to get up and go do something else.”

The boy has made a friend and has a special handshake with the physical education teacher. While there are no Afghan language interpreters at school, a Farsi-speaking staffer has been able to communicate some with the family. (Farsi and Dari are both Persian dialects.) In the sleeve of a school library book the boy brought home one February day, the staffer tucked a note in Persian script explaining the book must be returned.

Asked how he likes school, though, the boy talks instead about his dad, who had been beaten and pulled away from his family at the Kabul airport. “Save yourself and save our children,” he told his wife. “I will find a way to get out.” But the father is still in hiding, awaiting a humanitarian parole visa he has applied for.

On this day, the boy said through an interpreter he had dreamed the night before that “the Taliban were killing my dad.”

When he woke up, according to his mom, the 9-year-old asked if they could all go back to Afghanistan. “At least we’ll die together,” he said.

The children “can’t concentrate at school because day and night, their father is in their heads,” their mom said, weeping at times.

An Afghan mother of eight who now lives in Burien has already lost her husband. He was the victim of a suicide bomb last summer while working with U.S. forces. His work put the children at risk too, with kidnapping common. School was a long walk from their home on the outskirts of Jalalabad. So the children mostly stayed home. Even the oldest, 15- and 13-year-old girls, have never been to school, and have not learned to read.

“I really want the kids to go to school,” said their mother, who herself had only a few years of schooling because the education system in Afghanistan has been unstable and because the Taliban restricted education for girls when she was growing up. “They have wasted their life,” she continued. “We have an opportunity now.”

In the view of Ismail Khan, who was interpreting for her, it was taking too long to get the children enrolled. They had been in the Seattle area for a month and a half. Like many new arrivals served by overworked case managers in one of the most expensive housing markets in the country, the family was still in temporary housing, albeit a nicely furnished rambler. That meant they didn’t know what school district they would be in long-term.

The family moved to a permanent home in Auburn a couple weeks later and the kids started school, according to Khan, who emigrated from Afghanistan in 2014 and recently founded [Afghans of Puget Sound Alliance](#) to help those coming now. Yet, other Afghan children remain in limbo, he said.

Khan acknowledged school wasn’t going to be easy for children with limited or no education, and he plans to recruit volunteer tutors.

The results from just a couple months of tutoring can be seen around the corner from the widow’s home, where Fazilat, Awais and Mirwais live, along with their parents, baby sister and older siblings.

The family is one of eight from Afghanistan that are being resettled by groups of volunteer sponsors affiliated with Viets for Afghan, a largely Vietnamese-American organization that also includes Afghan immigrants like Khan. The U.S. government rolled out a “sponsor circle program” last year, meant to take some of the load off agencies, although this particular family is not part of the official program.

In addition to enrolling the kids in school, taking them to doctors visits and many other tasks, Nguyen, part of the group supporting the family, has been working with the children on English and basic math. In notebooks, the children have copied English words from a book in neat handwriting and spelled out their names. When a guest comes to their home, in the bottom floor of a split-level where the kids share a room decorated with a big American flag and tea is served at every opportunity in a sitting room encircled by cushions, the children eagerly respond when asked in English for their names.

The children attended school before COVID hit, but the instruction was not good, the teachers frequently absent and classes noisy and crowded with as many as 100 students, according to the kids and their father, Sahibzada. After their first day at elementary school the week after their tour, Fazilat and Awais said they were struck by the quiet.

“The school is better,” Fazilat said through an interpreter. “I like everything,” Awais said.

“I know the first year will be a little challenging,” their father acknowledged, but added he was confident after that “they will be OK.”

In educational circles, there is an acronym for students who have had little schooling — SLIFE (students with limited or interrupted formal education) — but little data on how they do once they start going regularly, according to Chris Chang-Bacon, an assistant professor in the University of Virginia’s School of Education and Human Development. What data there is suggests such students have a high dropout rate.

“We do find that their success is largely determined not by the students themselves but (by) how well the school is set up to receive them,” Chang-Bacon said. Strategies that help, he said, include access to bilingual staff and community members, ideally ones who speak the students’ language; support in English; teachers used to working with students at different levels; and flexibility to allow students to learn in different ways, for example by allowing them to research projects in their own language.

An after-school program for refugee students at Mill Creek Middle School in Kent, run by World Relief, offers hope. Two students from Afghanistan said they were earning mostly A’s and had been moved from English-language learner classes into mainstream ones for English-language arts.

Tawqir, a seventh grader who has lived in the U.S. for three years, said he didn’t understand much at first. “We find Afghan friends and they tell us what to do,” he said. With Kent a center of Afghan-American life, the district has as many as 1,000 such students from Afghanistan, estimates Garcha, the refugee service liaison.

Eighth grader Hadia, only six months in the U.S., praised her kind teachers, one of whom uses his phone to translate words she doesn’t know. She appears to know a lot, though. An activity this afternoon involved students looking at pieces of cloth and saying what it reminded them of.

“Afghanistan,” Hadia called out, looking at a red cloth speckled with green flowers. “Green is peace,” she said. “Red is like the war.”

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	03/21 WA sea grass, kelp sanctuary off Everett
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/state-creates-first-sea-grass-and-kelp-sanctuary-off-everett/
GIST	<p>A first-of-its-kind sanctuary has been created offshore of Everett, where 2,300 acres of state tidelands have been put off-limits to development for 50 years.</p> <p>Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz created the protection zone with the stroke of a pen, withdrawing the tidelands from potential development. Protected are kelp forests and eelgrass meadows near Hat Island and in the Snohomish River estuary.</p> <p>“We are just getting started,” said Franz, who added that the protection zones will be only part of a new state effort under a measure, SB5619, just passed by the Legislature to conserve and restore 10,000 acres of kelp and eelgrass by 2040.</p> <p>Kelp and eelgrass are the undersea forests and meadows that shelter and nurture aquatic life, just as grasslands and forests are havens on land. Sea grass meadows and kelp are the redoubt of myriad, tiny unsung lives that nourish and shelter the glamour species such including sea otters, salmon and orcas. Kelp forests also provide migratory corridors for baby salmon headed to sea and for adults headed back to their home river.</p>

“It’s part of the circle of life, one of the links in the chain, and without it the whole thing breaks down,” Tom Wooten, chairman of the Samish Indian Nation, said of eelgrass and kelp.

But there is trouble in this [blue-green paradise](#).

“I’ve lived here in our traditional territory in Anacortes my entire life, and I have seen what is happening with all the natural resources, but with kelp and eelgrass in particular,” Wooten said.

Monitoring by the tribe has [mapped a 36% loss in kelp in their traditional territory](#) in and around the San Juan Islands from 2006-2016, said Todd Woodard, director of natural resources for the tribe. Losses at some of the more northern islands in their territory are even higher, at about 70%, Woodard said. “It’s raising alarm bells.”

[Warming water, especially in recent marine heat waves, is believed to be a culprit](#), especially where water temperatures can climb in areas of low energy waves and currents.

Kelp is a keystone not only for the environment, but for tribal culture, Woodard said.

Declines were first noted by Samish elders who were having trouble getting big blades of bull kelp to wrap salmon for cooking, Woodard said.

Traditionally, the first rattles for Samish babies are dried kelp bulbs with pebbles inside. Eulachon oil burned for light was also carried in the bulbs. And eelgrass and kelp are home to the pearlescent eggs of herring, savored in feasts.

Even their extended family needs kelp, said Woodard. Southern resident orcas, especially J pod, whom the Samish regard as relatives, play in kelp, winding it around their flukes and flipping it with their tail. “We don’t know why it is important to them, but it is,” Woodard said.

Eelgrass beds are coincident with so many of the traditional foods cherished by the tribe, Woodard said. “When the tide goes out, the table is set — and when it’s low enough, you can walk out and get your crab.”

The overall area of eelgrass in Puget Sound is regarded as relatively stable, at about 57,000 acres, based on 18 years of monitoring by the Department of Natural Resources.

But those statistics hide big losses in local areas. Some San Juan Island coves and bays once home to lush eelgrass meadows have been totally denuded, said Drew Harvell, professor emeritus of Cornell University. She is a senior scientist at the University of Washington’s Friday Harbor Labs, [studying a wasting disease that kills eelgrass](#).

The disease is stoked by warmer water brought by the changing climate, Harvell noted. The wasting disease spreads both by water and by contact of infected blades with healthy patches.

The combined threats of urbanization and warming make preserving healthy eelgrass pastures all the more important, Harvell said.

Eelgrass is an ecosystem with superpowers, she said, from providing biodiversity hot spots to cleaning the water and even helping to absorb carbon dioxide, by the process of photosynthesis.

In that way, protecting kelp and eelgrass also helps build climate resilience, Harvell said. “What’s good for the environment is also good for people too.”

Healthy pastures of eelgrass offer a mesmerizing beauty, swishing gently in the ticktock of the tide. On a sunny day eelgrass is spangled with silvery bubbles of oxygen along vibrant green blades, as the grasses fizz with photosynthesis.

	<p>Preservation now can protect strongholds that can reseed other areas, Harvell noted. “It is so much faster and less expensive, if we can preserve sites rather than try to restore something that is completely damaged.”</p> <p>The new protection zone is part of a watershed-wide Snohomish River action plan announced by Franz last month in Everett. She calls it a “Tree to Sea” effort, to collaborate with other partners including tribal, federal and local governments to help recover salmon populations, working at the watershed scale.</p> <p>Salmon are in decline because of 1,000 cuts and it will take a multi-prong strategy by many partners to rebuild their numbers, Franz said.</p> <p>The Snohomish is the pilot project, which for DNR will include a range of work from stepping up efforts to remove derelict vessels and creosoted pilings, to planting trees and placing large woody debris in streams to help bring back the complex habitat salmon need in their fresh water phase of life.</p> <p>Bart Christiaen, a DNR eelgrass specialist, said the Snohomish was targeted for the first preservation zone in part because there is a large eelgrass area near the river delta. “It is very important for our out-migrating chum and Chinook salmon; it is the first eelgrass bed they encounter in their out migration.”</p> <p>The meadow also connects to a kelp bed that acts as a migratory corridor, said Helen Barry, kelp expert for DNR. “These eelgrass and kelp beds are the building blocks for the ecosystem; I think of them as the bottom line of habitat, with someplace to live, and something to eat.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 WA home to 5 threatening volcanoes
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article259553279.html
GIST	<p>Washington state is home to five volcanoes: Mount Rainier, Mount St. Helens, Mount Baker, Glacier Peak, and Mount Adams. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, all five of these volcanoes are listed as having high or very high threat potential.</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Natural Resources monitors these volcanoes and provides information on the volcanoes’ threats, how to prepare for evacuation in case of eruptions, and more information to educate citizens on the specific volcanoes:</p> <p>MOUNT RAINIER</p> <p>The last recorded large eruption of Mount Rainier was in 1894, but the volcano still releases gases and steam from its opening, as well as causing some day-to-day earthquakes. The DNR reports that 5,600 years ago the Osceola Mudflow, a debris avalanche that came down from Mount Rainier, filled valleys with about 400 feet of sediment at speeds up to 50 miles per hour. The latest major mudflow was in 1502, called the Electron Mudflow, and it’s estimated that Mount Rainier has caused about 60 of these large mudflow avalanches in the last 10,000 years. Mount Rainier is being monitored at highest priority and remains a potential threat even today.</p> <p>MOUNT ST. HELENS</p> <p>Mount St. Helens is known for the 1980 eruption that killed 57 people. The chain of events and eruptions caused debris to move at record speeds of 650 miles per hour, the largest avalanche in recorded history. Then between 2004 and 2008, minor explosions caused lava to build up in the volcano’s crater, growing a lava dome of 1,500 feet. Mount St. Helens is being monitored at highest priority and remains a potential threat.</p> <p>MOUNT BAKER</p> <p>Mount Baker is one of the youngest volcanoes in the Cascade mountain range, and erupts very infrequently compared to the others. The DNR reports that the last time the volcano had a major eruption was about 6,600 years ago, but its latest eruption was 1975. Steam and gas can still be seen coming out of</p>

	<p>parts of the volcano, but it is best known for its heavy snow in the winter, levels that even broke the world record for most snowfall in a season in 1999 with 95 feet. Mount Baker is currently being monitored as a highest priority threat volcano.</p> <p>GLACIER PEAK According the DNR, Glacier Peak is one of the more dangerous volcanoes in Washington state as the volcano frequently erupts and causes dangerous lava and mudflow. Glacier peak has had no signs of erupting for the past few decades but has a potential threat to severely damage Skagit and Stillaguamish River valleys. The last recorded eruption was about 300 years ago, but Glacier Peak is still being monitored for potential threats at the highest priority level.</p> <p>MOUNT ADAMS Mount Adams is the only volcano in Washington state that is only being monitored as a high priority threat, not highest priority. Mount Adams is the largest volcano in the Pacific Northwest, but has not had as many eruptions in total compared to the others. The latest eruption was recorded to be about 1,000 years ago, and the volcano caused some avalanches and mud flows between about 300 and 600 years ago.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 NASA: 5,000 worlds beyond solar system
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/21/world/5000-exoplanets-confirmation-nasa-scn/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)There are now more than 5,000 confirmed planets beyond our solar system, according to NASA.</p> <p>The latest addition of 65 exoplanets to the NASA Exoplanet Archive contributed to the scientific milestone marked on Monday. This archive is the home to exoplanet discoveries from peer-reviewed scientific papers that have been confirmed using multiple methods of detecting the planets.</p> <p>"It's not just a number," said Jessie Christiansen, science lead for the archive and a research scientist with the NASA Exoplanet Science Institute at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, in a statement. "Each one of them is a new world, a brand-new planet. I get excited about every one because we don't know anything about them."</p> <p>We're currently living in a golden age of exoplanet discovery. Although the existence of planets outside of our solar system had been previously proposed and certainly depicted in science fiction, these worlds were only first discovered in the 1990s.</p> <p>Exoplanets have varied features The diversity of exoplanets represent populations of planets unlike anything found in our solar system. They include rocky worlds larger than Earth called super-Earths, mini-Neptunes bigger than Earth but smaller than Neptune, and scorching hot Jupiters that dwarf our solar system's largest planet and closely orbit their host stars.</p> <p>Scientists have also found planets that orbit more than one star and even some around the remnants of dead stars called white dwarfs.</p> <p>So far, of the confirmed exoplanets, 30% are gas giants, 31% are super-Earths, and 35% are Neptune-like. Just 4% are terrestrial, or rocky planets like Earth or Mars.</p> <p>Previous exoplanet discoveries have been made thanks to planet-hunting telescopes and satellites like the Spitzer Space Telescope, the Kepler Space Telescope and the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite.</p> <p>When Christiansen was a graduate student in the early 2000s, there were only about 100 known exoplanets.</p> <p>"That's partly why I wanted to go into the field — because it was brand new and so exciting that people were finding planets around other stars," Christiansen said in a question and answer session shared by Caltech. "Now, exoplanets are almost ordinary. My colleague David Ciardi (chief scientist for the NASA</p>

Exoplanet Archive) pointed out the other day that half of the people alive have never lived in a world where we didn't know about exoplanets."

Kepler helped scientists discover about two-thirds of the 5,000 confirmed planets, Christiansen said.

In the new batch of 65 planets, many are super-Earth and sub-Neptune planets, along with some hot Jupiter-size planets. There are also two Earth-size planets, but they're about 620 degrees Fahrenheit (327 degrees Celsius), so more like "hot rocks" than habitable planets, Christiansen said.

She also noted that one is a system with five planets orbiting a small, cool red dwarf star -- not unlike the TRAPPIST-1 system, where a similar star hosts seven rocky planets.

Space observatories joining the hunt

New telescopes will only increase the potential for exoplanet discovery. The James Webb Space Telescope, launched in December, will be able to [peer through the atmospheres of exoplanets](#).

The Webb telescope is poised to study the TRAPPIST system in detail.

The Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope will launch in 2027 and aid in the search for exoplanets with a variety of techniques. The European Space Agency's ARIEL mission, launching in 2029, will study exoplanet atmospheres.

Although scientists have confirmed more than 5,000 exoplanets, there are likely hundreds of billions of them across the Milky Way galaxy.

"Of the 5,000 exoplanets known, 4,900 are located within a few thousand light-years of us, Christiansen said. "And think about the fact that we're 30,000 light-years from the center of the galaxy; if you extrapolate from the little bubble around us, that means there are many more planets in our galaxy we haven't found yet, as many as 100 to 200 billion. It's mind-blowing."

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	03/22 Sweden: student kills 2 teachers
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-education-sweden-fc6a5fdac5d8b0108b323a5fe66cedda
GIST	<p>STOCKHOLM (AP) — Two teachers were killed by a student at a high school in southern Sweden, police said Tuesday.</p> <p>The 18-year-old student was arrested at the scene on Monday in Malmo, Sweden's third-largest city. The victims were two women in their 50s, police said.</p> <p>The suspect wasn't previously known to the police and had no criminal record, and police didn't disclose how the teachers were killed. A motive hasn't been established.</p> <p>"For now it is far too early to comment on that," Malmo Police Chief Petra Stenkula told a news conference.</p> <p>She said officers arrived and found the suspect and two victims on the third floor of the downtown Malmo Latin School 10 minutes after they were alerted, adding that the situation was then "under control."</p> <p>Stenkula didn't confirm a report by the Aftonbladet newspaper, saying the male student himself called authorities to say he had killed two people, had put down his weapons and was on the third floor.</p>

	<p>Police made “seizures” and a forensic examination “will allow us to better understand what happened,” Stenkula said, adding authorities have no information of any further injuries.</p> <p>Police said they were called at 5:12 p.m. Monday. Scores of ambulances and patrol cars rushed to the school and armed police were seen entering the building, which was cordoned off.</p> <p>Students at the school, which has about 1,100 students, had gathered to work on a musical and students locked themselves inside classrooms.</p> <p>Sweden’s Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said she reacted “with sadness and dismay” to the killings, according to the Swedish news agency TT.</p> <p>All classes were suspended Tuesday and the school was closed.</p> <p>The killings took place in a modern annex of the school, which was founded in 1406 when the pope issued a letter of privilege allowing for its construction and operation. It was originally meant to educate local youth on Christian doctrine and the Latin language.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 ATM pried open in North Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/bank-america-atm-pried-open-north-seattle/QSNWTTBMWNG6FCPDINNSXI2MVU/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Another ATM has been targeted by thieves, this time in Seattle’s Wedgwood neighborhood.</p> <p>KIRO 7 News first heard about the incident at Bank of America in the 8400 block of 35th Avenue Northeast at around 5:30 a.m. Monday.</p> <p>Video from the scene showed an ATM that had been pried open. It is not yet known if cash was stolen.</p> <p>It’s the fourth attempted smash-and-grab burglary of an ATM in the last two weeks.</p> <p>On Thursday, there was an attempt to break into an ATM at the Walgreens off South Genesee Street in Seattle’s Columbia City neighborhood.</p> <p>Similar incidents were reported in Tacoma and in Renton.</p> <p>Seattle police said there have been six other attempts since the beginning of the year.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Miami Beach declares spring break curfew
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/us/miami-beach-shooting-emergency-curfew.html
GIST	<p>Faced with an onslaught of spring break revelers, Miami Beach officials declared a state of emergency on Monday and announced a curfew for the city’s South Beach area after two shootings over the weekend that left five people wounded.</p> <p>Mayor Dan Gelber said the shootings came during a period when “tens of thousands of people” descend upon the city, creating an unwanted “young party-hard crowd.”</p> <p>“We can’t endure this anymore, we just simply can’t,” Mr. Gelber said, adding that 371 police officers had been deployed over the weekend. “This isn’t your father’s, your mother’s spring break. This is something totally different. We don’t ask for spring break, we don’t promote it, we don’t encourage it, we just endure it, and frankly it’s something we don’t want to endure.”</p>

City commissioners will meet on Tuesday to finalize the curfew, which runs from 12:01 a.m. to 6 a.m. this Thursday through Monday. The curfew applies to a specific area in South Beach with many bars and restaurants, said Veronica Paysse, a spokeswoman for the city.

The police will ask people to go home after midnight, Mr. Gelber said.

City officials will also consider having a curfew on following weekends.

Alina Hudak, the city manager, characterized the two shootings as “cowardly acts of random people who come into our city and behave this way.”

A little after 1 a.m. Monday, two women were shot on Ocean Drive, a promenade lined with bars and restaurants that attracts many tourists and revelers according to the Miami Beach Police Department. A day earlier, around midnight, three people were hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries after a shooting that also occurred on Ocean Drive. The shootings remain under investigation, the police chief, Richard M. Clements, said.

Since spring break began in mid-February, nine officers have been injured in various episodes, Chief Clements said, adding that 37 firearms had been confiscated over the last three days. He said there had been an increase in weapons seized, noting there had been 100 so far this year, compared with 85 by this time last year.

An island with “limited capacity,” Miami Beach isn’t built to accommodate the type of crowds that gather there during spring break, Ms. Hudak said. The South Florida city is connected by several bridges to the rest of the Miami metropolitan area.

City officials voiced frustration with Miami Beach’s reputation as a spring break destination, which they said was unwelcome and resulted in large crowds overwhelming the city each year. Last year, the city also adopted a state of emergency, enabling it to enact a curfew during spring break to try to diminish crowds.

“We haven’t been able to figure out how to stop spring break from coming,” Mr. Gelber said. “We don’t want spring break here, but they keep coming.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 King Co. deputy injured by fleeing felon
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/king-county-deputy-injured-by-fleeing-felon-in-sammamish
GIST	<p>A King County deputy was injured after a fleeing felon pinned her between a vehicle in Sammamish late Monday night.</p> <p>A spokesperson for the King County Sheriff's Office said a man called deputies after he tracked some of his stolen items to a house in Sammamish. When deputies arrived they found a man in a Prius in the driveway of a house near 212th Ave SE and SE 20th.</p> <p>The female deputy exited her patrol vehicle and approached the Prius, but the man pulled out of the driveway, pinning her between the car and landscaping. Authorities said the deputy had minor injuries and did not need to be taken to a hospital.</p> <p>Deputies searched the area and found the Prius at 215th Ave SE and SE 24th St. A K9 unit searched the area, but the suspect has not been found, the spokesperson said.</p> <p>Investigators have not determined if the Prius was stolen.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Car thefts skyrocketing across Washington
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SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/car-thefts-skyrocketing-across-washington-covid-state-supreme-court-decisions/281-c58d8a71-3970-4ba3-bc1f-6ce784b66ecb
GIST	<p>BELLINGHAM, Wash. — Having your car stolen in Bellingham used to be a rarity.</p> <p>If it did happen, police could track down the usual suspects.</p> <p>Not anymore.</p> <p>"We have so many people stealing cars now it's very difficult to pin down who it is," said Bellingham Police Lt. Claudia Murphy.</p> <p>In just the first 79 days of 2022, Bellingham alone has seen 176 cars stolen.</p> <p>That's more than 2 a day -- unheard of for the city of fewer than 100,000 people.</p> <p>"It's unbelievable," says Murphy. "It's truly unbelievable."</p> <p>Statewide in the first 2 months of last year there were 4552 vehicle thefts.</p> <p>For the same two months of this year that number has nearly doubled to 8320.</p> <p>"I believe this is the first time we have ever topped 4,000 stolen vehicles per month," said Steve Strachan, executive director of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs.</p> <p>Police tell KING 5 those stolen cars often are used to commit even more crimes.</p> <p>There are many reasons attributed to the rising theft numbers, including COVID restrictions at local jails that limit the number of people who can be held.</p> <p>Strachan also points to a Washington Supreme Court decision that decriminalized the possession of small amounts of drugs, and law enforcement reform laws that forbid police from pursuing someone in a stolen car unless that person is drunk or otherwise dangerous.</p> <p>Strachan said the numbers started jumping right after that law was passed.</p> <p>"I've never seen such brazen contempt for law enforcement," said Strachan. "I think it's some of the best evidence I've seen that the change in the law has directly effected numbers of auto thefts."</p> <p>All those stolen cars have a ripple effect throughout the community.</p> <p>"It is the way on which people rely to get their kids to school or other activities, or to get to work and back," Bellingham's Lt. Murphy said. "It's really more than an inconvenience to most families to have their vehicle stolen."</p> <p>Bellingham is on track to top 700 vehicle thefts this year, nearly double the high of 368 in 2021, but Murphy says police are still arresting people and sending them to jail -- 13 so far this year.</p> <p>"We're still out here," says Murphy, "and we will catch you one way or the other."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 WA pot stores target for armed robberies
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/as-wa-marijuana-shops-see-more-armed-robberies-owners-and-politicians-say-there-is-a-simple-solution/

GIST

When the Snohomish County dispensary Dexter Warren worked at was robbed last year, four men simply walked in. When one of those men hit him in the face with a pistol and demanded he open the safe, the cash-based business had thousands of dollars on hand, he said.

By the time law enforcement arrived 20 minutes later, the men had already left with money and merchandise, said then-assistant manager Warren.

On Saturday, a man working at a [Tacoma cannabis retailer was shot](#), the third fatality related to a cannabis shop robbery within four days. On Wednesday and Thursday, two men each accused of robbing or attempting to rob a retail cannabis store were shot in separate incidents in [Bellevue](#) and [Covington](#).

In recent months, Washington retail marijuana store owners, industry leaders and politicians have said armed robberies at pot shops have increased, endangering employees, and have emphasized that solutions are needed at both the statewide and federal levels.

While robberies at retail marijuana stores in Washington are not formally tracked statewide, the Craft Cannabis Coalition, which represents over 50 retail stores in the state, keeps an informal tally with reports from members, said the association's executive director, Adán Espino. It is possible some robberies are missing from the association's tally.

According to the association's count, there have been around 67 armed robberies so far in 2022. In 2021 and 2020, the association counted 34 and 27 armed robberies.

Pot shops have long been targets for robberies because of the large amount of cash the businesses have on hand and because there is still a lucrative black market for marijuana, Espino said.

The robbery Wednesday at a Bellevue cannabis store was only the latest in a series, said Molly Honig, the co-owner of Green Theory. In the last year and a half, her four stores in Bellevue and Kirkland have been robbed at gunpoint six or seven times. Police have put a "tremendous amount of work" into solving those crimes, she said, and around half of those robberies have led to convictions.

The next evening, Ryan Evans, director of operations of the local chain Euphorium, said a man put an employee in a headlock and declared he was robbing the store before the store's ID checker fatally shot him.

"We're definitely seeing a really ugly trend in the beginning of 2022 and Western Washington," he said. "Not a lot of relief in sight."

While recreational marijuana was legalized in Washington in 2012 and most Americans live in places where marijuana is [legal in some form](#), the industry has been shut out of traditional banking services like accepting credit cards since marijuana is still illegal federally.

In the years after the first retail marijuana stores opened, the industry has grown to \$1.4 billion in sales and over a half-billion in tax revenue annually, said Washington State Treasurer Mike Pellicciotti. Forcing the industry to deal primarily in cash no longer makes sense from a public safety and government perspective, he said.

One fix that Pellicciotti is advocating for is the SAFE Banking Act, which would effectively open traditional banking services to retail marijuana stores. The act is currently being considered in the U.S. Senate Banking Committee.

Owners and industry groups largely agree passing the act would reduce the amount of cash on premise at a given time and help prevent criminal activity. Espino said access to credit card processing and safe banking would solve "the bulk of our problems."

“How much longer do we have to put our employees in danger before we do something about this?” he said. “People are starting to get shot.”

The House has passed the act around six times in the past without seeing the proposal become law. “Come hell or high water, Congress must pass the SAFE Banking Act this year,” Pellicciotti said.

“We do not see this in other industries,” he said. “It is not safe.”

Bill to increase sentencing, data sharing on robberies fails

In January, the Washington Senate [introduced a bill](#) intended to address safety and security at retail cannabis stores. The bill, which was amended and ultimately did not advance to the House floor for a vote, would have increased sentencing under certain conditions for those convicted of first- or second-degree robbery at a licensed cannabis retail outlet.

The bill would have also required stores to report robberies to the state Liquor and Cannabis Board and directed the state Liquor and Cannabis Board to share information and consult with Washington State Patrol.

During the public comment held at the end of January, Espino testified that 35 robberies had already occurred that month. Chris Thompson, representing the state’s Liquor and Cannabis Board, admitted the organization does not have “super good data on the incidents” but that there appears to be an increase in robberies.

Shea Hynes, the co-founder of Lux Pot Shop, testified that in more than 10 years of operating, his employees had never been victim to a robbery until January when his store was robbed at gunpoint three times.

“My staff are scared. I’ve had staff members with guns pointed at their faces twice in the last three weeks,” he said.

Interim director of the Cannabis Alliance, Caitlein Ryan, said while the organization acknowledged the need for solutions, they are neither for nor against it.

“We are deeply concerned that in the end, we will not see an impactful change other than possibly putting more people in jail with slightly longer sentences,” she said.

Ryan added that someone desperate enough to rob a store is likely unaware of the nuances in sentencing and that the bill may further drive an “inequitable and catastrophic incarceration endemic.”

Security at dispensaries

Warren said that while getting cash off the premises would help, stores should also protect their employees by paying for security guards and ID checkers or building two-way door systems, where people have to wait in a separate room before being allowed in the room with the merchandise.

While some stores have such measures, Espino said most businesses have to choose between breaking even and paying for security guards, who may not even be working when robberies occur. With cannabis still being illegal federally and businesses not being able to deduct their expenses, the effective tax rate for retail stores can fall between 60% and 70%, he said.

Stores have to make between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a month to break even, Espino said. Most security companies are also overbooked and are not taking new clients, Honig said. A licensed security guard can cost anywhere from \$75 to \$100 an hour, according to Evans.

Honig’s store was robbed in the hours before their security guard arrived, she said. Now, she is planning to pay for armed services around the clock.

	<p>The “big fix,” she said, would be federal legalization and safe banking and getting cash off the premises. Honig guessed that would allow robbery rates for pot shops to return to rates similar for other retail businesses.</p> <p>“It’s unfortunate that any business operating legally in Washington has to adopt additional safety protections because of the amount of cash they are operating with,” Pellicciotti said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/22 Germany conducts raids over hate posts
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/germany-conducts-raids-hate-posts-politicians-83593497
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- German authorities carried out raids across the country and questioned more than 100 suspects Tuesday in an investigation of hate posts against politicians connected to last year's national election, prosecutors said.</p> <p>The Frankfurt prosecutor's office and the Federal Criminal Police Office said that the raids resulted from an analysis of over 600 posts on social media for criminal content. The investigation was based on legislation that was introduced last year to provide for tough punishment of slander and abuse of people “in political life,” whether at local, regional or federal level.</p> <p>It provides for a punishment of up to three years in prison for abuse motivated by the person's position in public life that is liable to “significantly complicate their public work.”</p> <p>Prosecutors didn't name the targets of the posts that resulted in the raids, but said that the investigation covered posts against politicians from all the parties currently in Germany's national parliament and two-thirds of them are women. It said they included abuse against nationally known politicians as well as fake quotes that appeared designed to discredit their targets.</p> <p>The parliament was elected in late September.</p> <p>Tuesday's move “makes clear the scale on which office-holders are being insulted, slandered and threatened online,” the top prosecutor in Germany's central Hesse state, Torsten Kunze, said in a statement.</p> <p>There was no immediate word of any arrests.</p>
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